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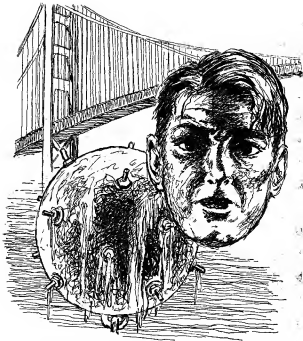
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KARL crouched in the black dripping shadows, a mere five hundred yards from the tremendous bridge, listening intently for any sounds of approaching guards who might stumble onto what was going on out there in the channel.

He shivered in the foggy pre-dawn wind which blew off the Golden

Gate. He heard the faint grating as the men on the sub lowered the mine. Clumsy fools! In the old days they'd have done the job swiftly and in silence, with fierce pride in each other's skill and reckless defiance in slipping within the very stronghold of the enemy and planting a lethal depth charge.



The masquerade had succeeded. Caught between the devil and deep blue sea, now he would have to choose between them

the

SABOTEUR

WILLIAM SAMBROT

The enemy has it. But will he deliver it? Where? How? Will it be atom stuff . . . something newer? These questions disturb millions of us, including the sea-pilots, sailors and fishermen who daily gather under Cliff House at San Francisco beach to sample rum and shoot scuttlebutt. Eavesdropping on their talk of how an attempt on Golden Gate Bridge might come, William Sambrot gives us this high-tension yarn—as timely as tomorrow morning's news broadcasts.

He opened his mouth to breathe, straining his ears for the faintest sound. His skin crawled as again he heard the clank-clank of chains from the sub, rocking out there in the swift tide race, while a group of hired mercenaries, of which he was one, made the adjustments to sensitize the great mine before dropping it into black water. From the bridge came the deep bellowing of the fog-horn, as though crying aloud a warning.

He stiffened and his hand closed

tightly about the short razor-edged commando knife. Two men were approaching from opposite directions. That was bad—this area was supposed to be meagerly guarded. He saw their hooded lights swing, poking with blank beams the jagged rocks and green-black buses which reached nearly to the great concrete pylon of the bridge. He waited tensely. Two of them, and acting cautiously. Could it be the Americans suspected something? How could they? The country which had hired

him and the others was clever. They talked peace but throughout the world, wherever a vital installation could be approached in the black of a foggy night, wherever a depth charge could be planted, or a silent, sleeping time bomb, there he and others like him had been directed to slip in, lay the charges and slip out. If Karl and the rest were caught, it would be found that they were of a dozen different nations—but none of the one which hired them.

Oh, they were clever, Karl's employers—and they paid well. But first, they tested their employees. Only those who hated with a blind animal ferocity everything that this colossus called the United States represented, only men who lived just to kill Americans, had been selected.

Karl grinned wolfishly to himself. It would be a distinct pleasure to reach out with his blade and with one swift practiced motion pierce a man's brain through the eye.

But now there were two men approaching from opposite directions—and the men on the water were making too much noise. Even these dull Yankees might detect the muffled clanging.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Karl's hair stirred at the base of his skull. The guard on his left had challenged the approaching guard on his right.

"Shut up, you fool. Kill that light!" The sharp authoritative voice from the other guard lashed out tensely.

"Password," the first said stubbornly, but his voice was lowered and his flashlight snuffed out.

"Margarine," the other whispered. "Who are you?"

"Corporal Allen, first reg, hundred-thirty-first recon. Sir, what are you doing here? They rushed down a bunch of us and said the walk guard—they didn't mention any others—"

The light winked briefly and Karl sucked in his breath. The light was dim, very dim; the person holding it blocked out most of the lens with his hand. But there was enough to show the silver bars. A captain!

"Keep your voice down," the captain said harshly. "I'm Andersen, Special Duty officer—there's a report of something having gone through the screen a couple of hours ago and we think—listen, did you hear that?"

The fools! The utterly incompetent fools! From beyond the jagged rocks, out in the black depths of the night, the clank of chains sounded faintly above the dull booming of the restless surf.

"Didn't hear anything, sir," the corporal said doubtfully.

Karl relaxed slightly. This captain had good ears.

"Get back on your patrol," the officer ordered. "And when you reach the end of your route pass the word along that Captain Andersen reports he thinks there's an anchored vessel off the main pylon of the bridge."

"Pretty foggy, sir," the guard said doubtfully. "Be hard to see anything out there."

The captain grunted.

"You think it's someone in trouble, sir?" the guard persisted.

"They're in trouble, all right," the

captain said dryly, "But not the way you imagine."

The corporal turned and stumbled off. The captain watched him for a moment, uttered a faint "damn it," then he said hoarsely, "Corporal—come back here."

"Sir?"

The captain hesitated, breathing harshly. Then he struggled. "What the hell—we're all in this together. Listen, corporal—I'm not known on this post—in fact, I flew here especially because of what we think is going on out there—so when you reach the guardpost, get in touch with your officer of the guard. Tell him to contact Major Whitehall—he's head of the Post G-2. Tell him I got in too late to see him but I think the report's affirmative. Have you got that?"

"Major Whitehall—report affirmative," the corporal said slowly, but his voice had become suspicious.

"All right—on the double!"

The corporal reluctantly turned and headed back the way he had come, but the captain remained motionless. Karl could barely make out the officer, standing stiffly, facing the channel.

Karl fumbled anxiously with his tiny radio. It was imperative that he warn the others to hurry and get away. He himself could remain and rendezvous elsewhere, in some other country, even, if necessary. He had all the papers, and his English was perfect. But first this captain must be put out of the way—permanently. He was obviously in the Intelligence. His loss would be important.

Karl tensed and the knife came up slowly. The captain was bent over, his light winking curiously on and off as he examined the ground. He approached Karl, still bent over. Closer. Closer. Now!

The knife flicked smoothly, met just the right spot. It was done. Karl pulled the limp body behind the damp brush and risked flicking his own light. It had been a neat job. Right through the left eye. There wasn't even blood on the uniform. Karl grinned. Neat job.

Then he spun the tiny crank on his radio and spoke bitingly in his harsh gutturals to those on the sub, telling them that soon there would be a crowd to watch them plant the radio-controlled depth charge.

He heard the hurried conversation on board the great silent sub and then the orders came back. There was no time to wait for him so he must get rid of his landing boat, fade away into the city and wait for further instructions.

He had the list of spots, he knew the right words and signs. The country for which he worked was thorough that way. When the time came, that charge planted in the bay, and hundreds of others like it, sunk or hung or buried near carefully pre-selected spots, could be detonated by a single press of a thick thumb—thousands of miles away. And they'd bring down strategic bridges, like that one out there, and important factories, snarling this whole hated country so that when the high-flying bombers appeared, it would be too stricken to retaliate.

"This job is done," an eerie voice whispered gutturally over the midget radio-phone. "Good luck, comrade."

Karl slid down the slope to where the small rubber boat bobbed gently against the tide. With a quick jab of his knife he punctured it, then dragged the cold rubber carcass back up onto the hill. He slashed it into bits and with the shovel it carried he dug up earth carefully, buried his radio and the pieces of rubber. Behind him, the white face of the dead captain gleamed palely.

It was starting to get light. Karl broke into a faint sweat. He hadn't figured on getting stuck here with daylight approaching.

Mentally he reviewed the map of this terrain—the Presidio of San Francisco. It sprawled over hundreds of rugged acres—and it crawled with soldiers. He flicked his light briefly on the dead officer and then his hard mouth slid into a smile. As simple as that!

It took about five minutes to change clothes with the corpse. He buried his own things, first making sure to remove all papers. It wouldn't do to have them fall into American hands. Code books, location of other mined spots, radio frequencies—

He had just thrown the shovel into the fog-shrouded water when he heard the sound of boots scraping against rock and brisk authoritative voices. He whirled. God! He'd forgotten the guard—the other guard. Figures loomed out of the thinning fog, coming directly toward him. At least half a dozen soldiers, with the corporal in the lead.

But couldn't he bluff this out? After all, the corporal hadn't got even a glimpse of the captain. This uniform was sufficiently soggy to explain why it hung badly—and best of all, the captain wasn't known on this post. It should be a comparatively simple matter. All it took was nerve and soon he'd be out of this and in the city.

Suddenly he was ravenously hungry. A hard night's work in chilly air gave a man an appetite.

In command of the group was a bleary-eyed, stubble-chinned young kid with gold bars gleaming dully on his shoulders. He looked curiously at Karl, and then, as though it had just occurred to him, he saluted half-heartedly.

"Captain Andersen?" Karl nodded, returning the salute. "We got in touch with Major Whitehall—he said your pilot reported you in at Fort Baker and he'd been trying to raise you down there." He looked expectantly at Karl. Karl's mind raced back to what the dead captain had said. He smiled coolly.

"I told the corporal to explain I'd got in too late to see him." He stared hard at the corporal.

"I relayed your message, sir," the corporal said. "Report affirmative, too."

"Is—will the major be out?" Karl asked the lieutenant.

"He didn't say," the young officer replied. "He seemed excited. He said," he smiled wryly, "he said when this is cleared up he'd like to meet you. Said he wants to shake the hand of the gutsiest guy in the service."

Karl nodded, but behind black eyes his brain churned. So far, so good. Apparently even the head of the area intelligence hadn't met Captain Andersen before.

It was obvious that somehow or other the project had leaked. Top intelligence must have been suspicious about this particular area and Captain Andersen had been detailed here to check. A great joke! The very man responsible for finding saboteurs was being impersonated by a saboteur! It would be quite simple to confuse everyone—and it would be a pleasure to do so. It was hard to keep the contempt from his eyes as he looked at the young bleary-eyed officer. Missed a few hours sleep and look at him!

"Is this the approximate spot you heard the sounds, corporal?" the lieutenant was saying tiredly. Karl tensed slightly as the non-com gave a brief searching glance all around. Dripping eucalyptus trees and shrubs stood out sharply now. It was quite light, but the corporal's glance slid past the grave of the dead intelligence officer and he nodded.

"I believe it was about here, sir," he said. "The captain said he heard chains or something out in the channel—I didn't, though."

Karl smiled. Here was his first opening.

"I may have been a bit hasty, Corporal," he said smoothly. "After you left I listened intently but failed to hear it again." He laughed shortly. "Probably a bit keyed up."

"Too late now," the officer said sourly. "The major said to tell you

he was dispatching a sweeper." He turned abruptly and gave a few low orders. Karl's jaw tightened when he saw the men begin to set up a field transmitter.

"Ship to shore," the young officer said laconically. He leaned closer. "We're to keep in touch with the sweeper from here and if we get a report affirmative you're to take over." He looked searchingly at Karl. "Mind telling me what it's all about, Sir?"

Karl smiled tightly. "It's a nuisance, that's all I can say. But I'll let you in on this much—I'm starved. If you'll hold down the post I'd like to get a bit of food in me."

The lieutenant looked doubtful. "We might get that report—I'll tell you what, sir. There's a jeep road just above. I'll send a man for some chow." He looked steadily at Karl. "I think that's best—don't you?"

A muscle flickered in Karl's jaw and almost instinctively he touched the little knife strapped to his forearm. He nodded.

"While we're waiting," he said, "I'll show you the spot from which I first heard the sounds." He led the group a good two hundred yards away from the body.

The hot coffee, when it arrived, was good—better, in fact, than what he'd been fed on the sub. He sighed and relaxed, eating scrambled eggs out of a borrowed mess-kit. This whole business was getting better and better.

Now and then gray shreds blew past as the breeze sweeping in off the Pacific continued to dissipate the fog,

He suddenly realized the fog-horn on the Golden Gate bridge had stopped its hoarse bellowing. The reddish spires of the bridge poked above the gray curtain, and from below he heard the quick sharp blast of a ship's horn.

The group of soldiers, clustered around a radio, were listening while one of them talked. Then a small, trim vessel, a little three-incher pointing jauntily skyward from her bow, edged cautiously into view, bucking the small waves of the tide rip as it nudged toward the bridge pylon.

Karl leaped to his feet, the blood cold in his veins. It was uncanny, but they seemed almost to know what had happened during the night's dark hours; that somewhere beneath the choppy gray waters slept a round spiked object loaded with destruction and primed to detonate when a certain radio frequency was sounded.

He had been undisturbed when the young officer had mentioned "sweeper." His knowledge of English was good, but not that good. But now, seeing the minesweeper below him, he knew it for what it was.

He saw the anchor go down and then the small boats put out loaded with dungaree-clad men. They were obviously about to drag the deep waters off the pylon.

He swallowed, took a deep breath and looked down at his soggy uniform. This was his protection. But not against an explosion. If those fools down there were using heavy

chains or cables to search for a primed mine—well, it would be premature—but the damage would be done anyway.

For the first time he noticed the small raised castles on the brass insignia on his uniform. So the Captain had been an Engineer!

He stiffened as he saw one of the small gigs pass directly over the spot where the mine should lay. He waited tensely.

The tiny gig, bobbing like a cork, made a slow circle about that particular spot, churning up bubbles of white until the entire area was marked by the white splotch of foam against the dark green.

Karl relaxed, remembering that there was such a thing as a sonic depth recorder. They could find it, after all, without exploding it. He was ready when one of the men shouted.

"They've found something," the lieutenant said, and his eyes had lost their all-night's tiredness.

One of the men came dog-trotting up.

"The sweep relays its compliments, and if there is a Captain Andersen ashore, to inform report affirmative, and would the captain speak with the skipper on the ship-to-shore?"

The warning bell of his sixth sense was pounding in the back of his head now. The sweeper had moved until it was approximately in the dead center of the great white ring the gigs had made about the mine location. They obviously expected him down there.

He shrugged. Any time he couldn't

outwit these people he deserved the worst. He picked up the ordinary telephone receiver. His tone was non-committal when he spoke into it. The voice at the other end was sharply authoritative but unexcited.

"We've had all the necessary gear ever since that Philly deal," the voice said. More gibberish. What was a "Philly deal"? "Boy, oh boy, Captain, you sure put your finger smack on it this time!" He smiled grimly. That at least made sense.

"There's a flat beach just beneath you—you'll get a little ducking but it's better than going all around to Fort Point," the voice rattled on. "We'll have a gig over there for you in nothing flat. It'll be a real pleasure to have you aboard, sir."

Karl glanced down onto the water and already a gig was bucking along, its prow digging green water and throwing white back, as it headed for the small patch of beach directly beneath them. He turned and saw the lieutenant regarding him quizzically.

For the first time he noticed the heavy .45 hanging at the other's waist. His mind raced. He was expected aboard that damn minesweeper. He could hardly beg off without bringing inquiries. This was a big rugged area; if he suddenly broke and ran it would take days to find him—but find him they would. No man could live in that racing channel and the Presidio was a tiny peninsula jutting out from the greater peninsula that was the city.

It was a neat trap—but there was little those on the minesweeper could

do. He smiled secretly at the thought. Six hundred pounds of super-explosive left damn little room for argument. They'd be fools to tamper with it—and as Captain Andersen, engineer and intelligence officer, he'd tell them so in no uncertain terms. He turned to the officer.

"Thanks for the breakfast," he said. The officer nodded.

"I suppose I should accompany you—it's my detail," he said, excitement glinting in his eyes. Karl shrugged, covertly searching the lieutenant's face for some sign of suspicion.

As they slid down the hill, Karl braced his elbow against the bulk the packaged code-books made. He'd be in a hell of a fix if he lost them—and even worse if these Yanks found them on him. But then, if they did, it meant he was found out—and Karl was too smart for that. Wasn't he Captain Andersen, U.S. Engineers?

On the minesweeper, the skipper waited at the head of the ladder, big rough hand outstretched to greet him.

"By God!" he said gruffly, but his keen eyes were frankly admiring. "I never thought I'd ever meet *the* Captain Andersen—but let me tell you—a pleasure!"

Karl smiled politely and shook the hand. He glanced warily about the compact vessel, and all along the narrow deck he saw heads peering out at him. That race-hammer note of warning began to pound at the base of his skull. Something was up, something not calculated by the careful planners who'd paid him to sink that

load of death which even now bobbed on an anchor chain far below them. Up ahead there was a bit of subdued cheering and a creaking of winches.

Karl spun and saw the grotesque bulbous helmet of a diver just breaking water. He came up in a sling contraption, attached to the forward boom.

The skipper watched with an uneasy smile as they twirled the helmet on the diver. The diver sucked air, and his face was peculiarly gray.

"It's bobbing on the end of a long chain," he croaked, after someone had lit a cigarette and stuck it in his mouth. "Biggest ugliest god-damned thing I ever saw. I'm glad my part of it's over." He craned his neck and peered out onto the water, grinning sickly when he saw a small bright orange buoy bobbing up and down on the swells. "There she is, boys," he said grimly. "X marks the spot."

But this time the whole ship's crew had gathered around, staring solemnly at Karl.

The young lieutenant gazed at the buoy and then he tapped the skipper's shoulder. "What is it, sir?"

The skipper looked at Karl. "It's top classified," he said doubtfully. Karl nodded.

"Why not tell him?" he said casually. "He's one of us."

The skipper shot him an admiring glance. "We got the tip a couple of months ago that they had started planting those things," he said moodily, looking out at the buoy in fascinated horror. "You've got to hand it to G-2," he said softly, turn-

ing and looking with respect at Karl. "I heard about the job you did at Philadelphia! I guess it'll make this one that much easier—but I wouldn't have the guts."

KARL nodded noncommittally, but his heart pounded like thunder. The word "Philadelphia" rang a bell, loud and clear. He *had* done a job at Philadelphia—precisely the same job he'd done last night, right on this spot. It was frightening to stare at this keen-eyed devil and hear him say he'd heard about it.

"What happened in Philly?" the kid officer was asking.

"Mine planted—same as here," the skipper grunted. "Divers went down, took pictures of it. They discovered it was an entirely new type of mine—any tampering would set it off. Fortunately there were three or four ordnance and engineer lads who were familiar with booby-traps and such devices—" The morning was chilly but the skipper's forehead was glistening.

"Captain Andersen here," he said, motioning at Karl, "went down in a diver's suit. They cleared the area for two miles around the piers. It took him four hours—but he *disarmed* it." He spat into the water. "Thank God there's still a few men left with guts in this country," he said in a low voice.

Karl's heart was choking him. He fought with all his skill to maintain a poker face. What was the man saying? The mine at Philadelphia had been *disarmed*? Impossible! But what was more impossible, they ex-

pected him to go down there into that gray ominous water, to descend into the depths and tinker with six hundred pounds of sure death.

He felt the sweat sliding down his legs and running into his shoes. Out of the corners of his eyes he measured the possibility of swimming to shore—knowing it was foolish even as he did so. The gigs would catch him before he could make ten yards. Think. Think. There had to be a way out. There was always a way.

"Some night - bombing crews thought they'd spotted a sub the other night on a practice run—just about sundown," the skipper was telling the kid. "So G-2 put two and two together and sent for the captain. Right, sir?" Karl nodded stiffly, his mind racing.

"A night patrol thought they'd raised a ping last night," the skipper said tonelessly, "and well, it wasn't hard to figure what they were up to."

The lieutenant looked at Karl with awe in his eyes. "And now you're going to go down to disarm that thing!"

Karl smiled flintily. There was no way out. If he'd had time to throw that body into the ocean—it was a simple matter out here to get rid of the damaging code books. But once they discovered he wasn't the captain—and started looking for the captain—. The circle was being pulled tighter and tighter. What was this fool saying?

"—you make me proud to be in the service," the kid was saying, one hand extended. Karl automatically took it. "I hope everything goes off

all right, sir."

And like a red hot ball in his stomach the relief exploded, sending warm streamers through his body, he went limp. It was that simple. He felt like laughing in their stupid faces.

He snapped his cigarette out into the channel and smiled at the lieutenant. "It's simple when you know how it's done," he said.

He strode forward toward the diving gear. He would get in the suit, allow them to lower him near the mine, and then quite simply say that he needed some special tool which he had left at the Post. Once back on land it would be a matter of hide and seek—and there were few to match him on that—especially if he had a few hours start without suspicion attached to him.

The skipper himself helped him into the gear, his seamed face pale under the reddish tan.

"Everything's up to you, Captain Andersen—and God be with you," the skipper said softly, then he screwed on the helmet.

Karl grinned as he swung high above the water and then began a swift descent. But he stopped grinning when his downward motion halted abruptly and he slowly swung back toward the deck. He saw the skipper pick up the black mike and his voice sounded tinny. Beyond him, a crewman was trotting up, carrying an odd assortment of objects attached to a belt.

"For God's sake," the skipper croaked. "We plain forgot to hitch your tools on!"

"My tools?" Karl said faintly.

"Your pilot brought the bag down to the dock. Said they were the ones you'd used on the Philly job. Now how could you have forgotten a thing like that?"

He hung suspended, his lead-shod feet so near and yet so far from the deck while they strapped the belt of tools about him. Beyond the rail the gray-green water ruffled up in small whitecaps. And beneath that enigmatic surface a spiny iron object swayed with the tide-motion, waiting for the thumb to press the proper button, to transmit the exact wavelength which would erupt it into lurid destruction.

He swung out above the water, and just for an instant caught a glimpse of the low blue and brown hills, dappled with dark shrubbery. Over there a brave man lay dead—a man who knew how to pull the fangs of what Karl had planted—and as the icy water closed over him, Karl knew the circle was complete.

The water became colder; darker. The pressure mounted on his body. He had difficulty in breathing; the bulk of the codebooks pressed against him. He had refused, up above, to take off the G.I. jacket and pull on the warm sweater the skipper had offered.

Now below him he saw the ball that was the mine. His lead feet pulled him down, down, heading directly for the iron shell that was as sensitive to touch as a bubble—a deadly shell, swelling hungrily for the impact of heavy, leaded shoes.

"Take your time, captain," the harsh voice whispered shakily in his

ear. "The other diver already has a line down there—when it's disarmed, lash a loop about it and we'll pull the damn thing up so fast it'll sizzle."

Closer and closer came that implacable evil thing he had helped plant. How long could he stay there, hung between two deaths? Until he lied and said "Pull it up—it's disarmed"? Why, the slightest tug would detonate it—smashing harbor, minesweeper, Karl. He was so close now he could reach out and touch it if he dared.

He hung there, swaying in rhythm with the great globe which dwarfed him, looming dark and terrible in the cold alien water. His mind raced like a rat on a treadmill. He thought of his knife, strapped to his forearm. No succor there.

He peered through the water, deepening from purple to velvet black. He suddenly began shivering uncontrollably. How long could he hold out? One hour? Two? The water was cold. Cold.

He hung there, between two deaths, knowing at last that life was sweet, and his, the sweetest of all, hung between two choices. Which should it be? Down here, in the silent cold depths, or up there, where a brave old man waited, while another brave man lay dead beneath a dripping green bush.

He took a deep breath.

"Pull me up," he croaked.

"What's that? Up? Man, man, are you through so soon?"

"I'm through," he said bitterly. "Pull me up—I have a statement to make."

Brutal this plan, and shrewd—

but who was the real victim?

DOROTHY F. HORTON

MY FAVORITE corpse

Death does a double-take in this gory murder miniature, which packs a punch unusual in stories so short. Authoress and husband inhabit a trailer near Seattle. "A house would steal time from our writing," she claims.

ARTIE SCHUBBER stepped into the closet behind the living room doorbed and waited. The fingers of his right hand, encased in a light cotton glove, tightened around the butt of a small gun. He listened, tense and alert, to the scraping of the key in the lock. Jenny, his wife, had finally come home.

Any instant now Jenny should be coming into the closet to hang away her coat. His ears strained, listening. She didn't seem to be coming. The close, stale air of the closet made him a little dizzy.

Damn her! He wanted to get this over with. He could hear her pacing back and forth, back and forth, soft thuds on the thick carpet; hard, sharp click-clacks when her heels struck the bare floor. He could hear her muffled sobbing.

Well, she wouldn't cry much longer. So she wouldn't give him his freedom to marry Lili! He'd see about that.

She stopped pacing but she didn't come to the closet. He heard the *whisk* of the springs in the overstuffed cushion as she sat down in the chair by the window. He could picture her there, wiping her eyes, pitying herself. The sound of her switching on the reading light snapped across his taut nerves like the crack of a whip. He started to sweat. So she was going to sit at the window awhile? He could wait.

He had his alibi ready. He had gone to sleep in the lobby of the hotel he usually stayed in when in Tacoma. The clerk had seen him. They had talked about his being so tired. He had murmured a goodnight to the clerk and had gone up to his room. He was sure no one had seen him come down the fire-escape later. Leaving his car in the garage, he had sneaked back to Seattle on the bus. In the morning he would be once more in his bed in the hotel room; the clerk would call him and no one would know a thing.

Even the gun couldn't give him away. He had bought one smaller than his own, several months before while on a business trip in the east.

Too, he had been "getting along" with Jenny for a long time; had been calling her "dear" and "honey" before their friends. He wasn't always sure that Jenny was fooled, but the friends were. He shuddered, thinking back over the bridge games he had played, the countless movies he had sat through with Jenny—all the time aching to be with Lil.

His blood warmed, raced, just thinking of Lil. For Lil he was killing his wife; for Lil, whose hair was soft and golden. Because Jenny would not give him up to "that blonde."

Lil was more than "that blonde" to Artie. She was necessity, life, beauty, desirable above all others. When she would half-close those languorous honey-colored eyes of hers and pout that soft, red mouth, he would do anything to possess her. But Jenny recently had been keeping

too close track of him; why, it was more than two weeks since he had actually seen Lil . . .

A sudden creaking of Jenny's chair set his arm to trembling. He steadied himself. This was it. More than fifty minutes had passed since Artie had slipped into his apartment through the ground-floor window by Jenny's chair (so no one he knew would recognize him if they met him in the hall), but it seemed like a month had passed.

Jenny was getting up, coming toward the closet door, opening it a crack, then swinging it wider. His whole body strained backward in the darkness of the clothing. He mustn't move too soon.

A dress slipped off a hanger and slithered to the floor. Jenny stooped to pick it up. He saw her eyes glimpse his shoes, his feet. He heard the swift, harsh rasp of her gasp. He lunged forward, held his hand over her mouth and pressed the gun to her temple.

He pulled her into the smothering closeness of the hanging coats and dresses and pulled the trigger. The sound of the explosion struck his ear with a muffled "plunk," satisfactorily deadened by the encompassing clothing.

He carried the dead cold weight of her back to the chair near the window, set her up in it, with her head sliding off the back, lopping over against the table top. He noted the wet handkerchief and the tear stains on the table. Good! It looked like suicide.

He pressed her fingers around the

gun butt, made the imprint of her forefinger on the trigger and loosened her fingers again, easing the gun to the floor.

He left the reading lamp switched on, of course. She wouldn't have been able to turn it off after shooting herself. He stepped to the window, slipped it up, slid through.

All right, it was over. He could feel his heart hammering against his ribs, feel his stomach bunched into a tight ball inside him. His mind clutched at one thought—wouldn't let go. He wanted—he had to see Lil—wanted to hold her in his arms—kiss her just once.

His legs wouldn't carry him toward the bus station. They took him to Lil's—only a few blocks away, up the dim stairway to her second-story apartment, up to the door, where he stood for a moment, his heart quaking. He fitted his key into the lock.

When he stepped into the hall, he blinked dazedly for a moment. What was the light doing on? It was late. Lil ought to be in bed.

He stepped toward, listened. He

might scare Lil popping in this way. "It's me, Artie," he called out. "Where are you?"

No answer. He stepped into the living room, then took a panicky back step, placing his hand on the door casing for support. Lil lay sprawled on the floor, one arm doubled under her. The blue robe, the soft, clinging blue robe he had given her, covered her still body.

He knew she was dead even before he saw the gun. He picked the gun up, held it in his clenched fist. Tears filled his eyes and spilled over.

He heard the two policemen pounding up the stairs. He heard the woman with them draw her breath in sharply. "There he is right now," she said. "I told you I heard a shot."

He didn't try to get away. What was the use of it, with Lil gone?

He handed the gun over to one of the policemen, his own gun, the one he had left lying around his apartment so they wouldn't trace Jenny's murder to him.

Damn Jenny. Now he knew where she had been so late.

Who-Dun-It?

WHEN GET to talking to a farmer near Bennington, Vt., about his hard luck. Someone had set fire to his barn. Someone had poisoned his dog. Someone had shot two of his cows. And someone had knocked out the dam in his brook. He said it was his opinion that one person did it all. Also he thought he knew who it was. Naturally we asked who. "Some miscreant," he replied.

—Walter Davenport, in *Colliers*

H. L. GOLD

LOVE

BEING Livy Random wasn't easy. It meant having a face a little too long, a figure a little too plump, brown hair brushed and brushed yet always uncurling at the ends. It meant not being able to make herself more than passably attractive. Worse than that, being Livy Random meant being Mrs. Mark Random, the wife of that smug lump asleep in the other bed.

Mark wasn't snoring; he was too neat for that. He was always making even stacks of things, or putting them in alphabetical order on shelves, or straightening rugs and pictures, or breathing neatly in the other bed.

Livy closed the bedroom door with a bang. Mark didn't stir; he could fall asleep in one infuriating minute, and wake up, eight hours later to the second, in exactly the same unlovely position and disposition. Her high-heeled shoes didn't bother him when she kicked them off, and neither did scraping the chair back against the wall—he hated chair marks on walls

Most editors, they say, are disappointed writers. Not so with the Gold boy, whose editorship of the magazine Galaxy has made it a leading contender in the science fiction field. He told his first story at twenty, has since placed more than five million words of slick, pulp and radio literature—chiefly science and fantasy stuff. Life, in a recent issue, accused him of a pessimistic turn. If so, don't blame it on any tinge

—when she sat down to take off her stockings. And Livy Random wanted, venomously, to bother her husband.

Mark Random had married her because he had been made sales manager of the electric battery factory, and he'd had enough of eating in restaurants while he had been a traveling salesman. Besides, it looked better for a man in his position to be married. Livy had accepted him because she was past thirty and nobody else might ask her; besides, she needed someone to support her. So

How can a girl defend
herself when an invisible
visitor makes passes?

ETHEREAL

of blue in the Gold. His faith in humanity is attested by the unique job he once held—that of casting himself upon the waters twice daily, to be rescued by lifeguards who wished to demonstrate to seabeard municipalities that they kept busy enough not to be fired. Besides, what could be more optimistic than the cure for wisely repressions proposed in this story!

she cooked for him. She cleaned for him. She even tried to keep a budget for him, though that was his idea. He gave her a meager household allowance and nothing else.

Nothing, in this case, must be understood as the complete and humiliating absence of everything. When Livy was particularly incensed about her marriage, which was generally, it was some comfort to know that she could have it easily annulled. And Mark couldn't do a thing to stop her. He hadn't, at least, and there was no sign that he intended

to, cared to, or even thought of it.

Pulling her slip over her head, Livy wondered about this. She had heard, at least as often as any other girl, that all men were beasts. Mark was, of course, a beast in a way—in his special, primly exasperating way. But he wasn't a beast in the usual sense. With Livy, anyway. Maybe some woman in a back street hovel thought he was. But that wasn't likely; he would have wedded the lady and saved the cost of this apartment.

What was wrong with Mark? It wasn't Livy, because she had known her duty and had been grimly prepared for it, though God knew this tall and pudgy person inspired nothing at all in her.

"Short and pudgy," she thought, reaching around back for the snaps. "Why doesn't somebody put snaps in front where they belong and where a body can get at them, and make a fortune? Short and pudgy is bad enough, but Mark's got to be

tail and pudgy, with a stomach that pulls his shoulders down and caves in his chest. And those black-rimmed glasses—some oculist must have been stuck with them for years. That hair of his—thick, oily, wavy and *yellow*. Like butter starting to melt—”

She looked at him again. What had made her think that marrying him was better than not being married at all? She could have got at least a housekeeper's job somewhere. With the possibility that some man in the household would fall in love with her.

Livy stopped. She crossed her arms over her breasts. It was the oddest sensation.

Somebody was staring at her as she undressed.

Mark? It didn't seem possible, but she held her slip in front of her and flipped the switch and looked. He was on his side, one arm under his head, and his back was to her. He never looked at her in the light, so why should he stare at her in the dark?

Livy peered under the window shades. They reached the sills; nobody could see beneath them or around them. She felt like a fool bending to glance under the beds, poking warily among the dresses and suits in the closets, and searching behind the furniture.

The light aroused Mark; that was something. He twisted around to face her blurrily.

“What's the matter?” he asked, his thin voice fuzzily peevish.

“Somebody was watching me undress,” she said.

“Here?”

She tightened her lips. “I haven't undressed in the street in years,” she said. “Of course it was here!”

“You mean somebody's in the room with us?” He reached out for his glasses on the night table. “I don't see anyone.”

“I know,” she said flatly. “I searched the place. It's empty. Or it might as well be.”

He stared at her. He wasn't, of course, looking below her face, though she still had her slip clutched in front of her. He was staring at her face as if she had a smudge on it.

“Do you often have these ideas?” he asked.

“Go on back to sleep,” she said. “If you want to act like a psychiatrist, your own case would keep you busy for years.”

He was still looking at her face, so she turned off the light. She held the slip until she heard him turn heavily, then grunt as he spread himself in the same position as before.

Livy hung up her slip and began peeling off her girdle. There it was again—hungry eyes peering out of the dark, touching her body with ocular caresses.

It wasn't imagination. It couldn't be. She'd been mentally undressed as often as any other not too attractive girl, and she knew the shrinking, exposed feeling too well to mistake it.

No use turning on the light again. She wouldn't find anyone in the room.

“Let's be reasonable,” she thought, fighting an urge to leap into bed

and scream. "I'm tired. Pooped, if you want to know. That dreary little Mrs. Hall made a hash out of the bridge game. Why do I always draw town idiots as partners? Is it some curse that was put on my family back in the Middle Ages? That's all I need; it's not enough playing house with this inspecting officer searching for dust under the furniture.

"All right, I'm exhausted and jumpy. I'm normal, or what passes for normal. If anybody mentions Freud to me, I'll start swinging this girdle like a night-stick. I'm not losing my mind. I'm not having a wish-fulfillment either, if that's what you're thinking. Livy dear, it's just time I went to bed—and don't go twisting *that* statement around."

Her eyes did ache a bit; all that smoke. Maybe she should cut out cigarettes. Aching eyes could make you see things that weren't there. This wasn't exactly seeing, but maybe it was connected somehow.

Livy closed her eyes experimentally, and the effect was more startling than the skin sensation.

In the dark, with her eyes shut, she could *see* who was staring at her. It gave her a shock until she realized that she could *imagine* it, rather; she couldn't see unless her eyes were open, could she? She tried it, and the image disappeared. She closed them again and there it was.

As long as it was her imagination, she studied the imaginary owner of the imaginary eyes. She stared at him just as intently as she imagined he was staring at her.

"Stunning," was her first verdict,

and then, "What a build! I must have been peering unconsciously at those physical culture magazines on the newsstands. That long blue hair and those wide blond eyes and a cute little straight nose—I *always did* love a man with a cleft in his chin! Heavens, did you ever see such *muscles*? And—wait a minute!"

She opened her eyes quickly. A girl had to have some modesty, even if her imagination didn't. And then something jarred her sense of logic.

Long *blue* hair and wide *blond* eyes? It must have been a twist of her subvocal tongue. She meant long blond hair and wide blue eyes. Of course.

She closed her eyes and re-checked. The hair was blue and the eyes were blond, or close enough to it. That wasn't all, either. It wasn't really hair. It was feathers. Long, very fine, like bird-of-paradise plumage; but feathers. As long as they were sort of combed flat, she could never have guessed. But her stunning imaginary man frowned as she stared at him, and the frown lifted his—well, feathers, into an attractive crest. Very attractive, in fact. She liked the effect much better than hair. . . .

Peculiar. The dazzling creature was blushing under her stare, and turning his head away shyly. Was it possible to blush a beautiful shocking pink? And to have pointed leprechaun ears much handsomer than the regular male clam-shell variety? And since when does a mental image turn bashful?

"Who cares?" thought Livy.

"You're a gorgeous thing, and any psychiatrist cures me of this particular delusion over my dead body! Now go away or I won't get a wink of sleep all night."

With her eyes shut, she saw the unearthly vision walk dutifully toward the bedroom door, open it and close it behind him.

"That you, Livy?" asked Mark from his bed.

"Is what me?"

"Opening the door."

"I haven't budged from this spot."

She heard him roll over and sit up again. "I'm a practical man with both feet on the ground," he said. "I don't hear things unless there's something to hear. And I heard the door open and close."

Livy pulled on her nightgown over her head—warm, thick flannel because texture and sheerness didn't matter. "All right, you heard the door open and close," she said, falling back luxuriously on her soft mattress and dragging the heavy blankets up. "You can't get me to argue with you this time of the night."

"Something's wrong with you," said Mark. "We'll find out what it is tomorrow."

As far as she was concerned, there was nothing whatever wrong with her. Why shouldn't an unhappy woman imagine a handsome, thrilling man admiring her? Maybe there was some hidden and sinister significance in the blue plumage and pointed ears, but she didn't care to know about it.

* * * *

She knew Mark wouldn't risk one of her tempers by waking her up to talk, so she firmly pretended to be sleeping while he dressed, made his own breakfast, and drove away. Then she got out of bed and took off the nightgown.

Sure enough, her flesh shrank. She felt as if she were being spied on.

"Look," she said textily to her subconscious, or libido, or whatever the term was, "not the first thing in the morning. Let me at least brush my teeth and have some of that black mud Mark calls coffee."

Anyway, it was ridiculous, right in broad daylight. Phantasms are for the dark. Any decent neurosis ought to know that.

Nevertheless, Livy closed her eyes to test her memory. The exciting dreamboat with the blue plumage, blond eyes and gay ears was exactly the same—staring hungrily at her from somewhere near the vanity. Certainly she saw the vanity; she knew it was there, didn't she? She tried staring back, to see if her imaginary loverboy would blush and turn away again. He didn't, which probably meant that some quirk in her mind had grown bolder, for he grinned becomingly and his blond eyes smiled up and down her body.

"I never would have believed it," she muttered moodily, opening her eyes and proceeding to dress. "Rainy evenings I can understand, but I usually feel so nasty in the morning."

She was washing the dishes after breakfast when she felt the first physical symptom of her delusion. It was

a light, airy kiss on the back of her neck. Goosebumps bloomed, her spine went sirupy, her knees came unhinged.

She swiftly disposed of the thrill by blaming it on a loose end of hair. But she cautiously pinned her thatch all up under a kerchief; another few ethereal kisses there, whether uncurled hair or psychological, and she would climb the wall.

Next time she felt the kiss, it started at her neck and worked down to her shoulder, six distinct and passionate touches of warm, hard lips. Weakly she realized that her hair was still tightly bound and pinned up, and that left only one conclusion to be drawn.

"All right," she said, dizzily happy, "I'm going nutty. Wonder why I never thought of it before."

There were more kisses during the day, enough to keep her glowing. Hallucinations, of course, but wonderful ones, and she resolved to hang grimly onto them. So she left Mark his dinner and a note, and then went out to a movie.

In the theater, peculiarly, she felt more alone than she had at home. The picture was nothing to rave about, but she saw it three times to make sure Mark would be in bed when she returned.

He was, and breathing. She undressed in no great hurry, finally accustomed to the peeping sensation. But when she was under the covers, she screamed suddenly and scrambled out. Mark was awake by the time she turned on the light.

"Now what?" he grumbled.

She goggled at him in alarm. "It wasn't you?" she asked.

"What wasn't me?"

She sat tentatively on the edge of the bed and rubbed her arm. "Somebody—I thought it was you—I could feel his fingers on my arm just as plain—"

"Whom," Mark asked, confused, "are you talking about?"

She put her chin out. "Somebody tried to get into bed with me."

"M-mm," Mark nodded solemnly, acting not at all astonished. He put his plump, white, flat feet into slippers and wrestled into a bathrobe. He said anxiously, "Now don't get alarmed, Livy. We'll see this thing through."

"Don't bother," she said. "As long as I know it wasn't you, I'm satisfied."

"I am not in the habit of *slinking*."

"No," she admitted, looking at him appraisingly. "You haven't the physique. Then again, if you did have, you wouldn't have to slink." She gave her head a shake. "I don't know what to think." And she began to cry.

"Now, none of that," he said. "We'll have you all right in a jiffy."

She stood up, ready to run over the beds, if necessary. "Oh, no, not now, you're not."

"I don't know what you mean," he said, and he went to the telephone extension and called Ben Dashman. He agreed with Ben that it was rather late, but added, "It's urgent, Ben, and you're the only one I can turn to. It's Livy's nerves. They've—snapped! You'll have to get your

clothes on and come right over."

"Ben Dashman," said Livy scornfully. "Here's one consumer whose resistance that business psychologist can't break down. The two of you will just get to your offices all tired out tomorrow, and for what?"

"When there is a crisis, sleep is a secondary consideration," Mark said. "Ben and I are men of action. This will not be the first time we've worked through the night."

But Ben, when he arrived, sat on a chair at one side of her bed, and Mark sat on his own bed and explained to Ben, over Livy's indignant body, the little he knew of what he referred to as her case. Though the information didn't amount to much, it made her just as embarrassed as the first peeping incident.

If Mark Random was pompous and oratorical, and he was, Ben Dashman could claim the doubtful credit. Mark had modeled himself after that successful expert on business psychology, who had read his way up to the vice-presidency-in-charge-of-sales. Ben could quote whole chapters of inspirational and analytical studies, whereas Mark had mastered no more than brief sentences and paragraphs. The voice had a lot to do with Ben's sensational rise, however. Mark had a slightly petulant voice, about Middle C, while Ben had learned to pitch his a full octave below comfort and to propel his words like strung spitballs.

Physically, Ben was even less appetizing than Mark. He had a bigger stomach, wider hips, rounder shoulders, white hair split in the center

and stuck damply to his pink head, heavy lips that he loved to pucker thoughtfully, and pince-nez. Mark would have paid a lot for a pince-nez that would stay on him, but they either stopped his circulation or fell off.

"Well," said Ben when Mark was through. Livy won the bet she had made with herself that that would be his first response; it gave him time to think. "Do you have anything to add, Livy?"

"Sure. Go home, or take Mark out to a bar. I want to go to sleep."

"I mean about your—strange feeling," Ben persisted.

"I recommend it to all women," she said. "If I knew how, I'd manufacture and sell these dream admirers on the installment plan, and give them free to the needy. It's made me ten years younger. Now go away. I've a date with my delusion."

"Listen," said Mark earnestly. "Ben got out of bed and came over here to help you. We both want to help you. Ben has read all there is to know about mental cases."

"I'm not a mental case," Livy said. "I was until now, but I'm not any more. If you both want to help me, you can develop amnesia and wander out of my life. For good. If I'm sick, it's of you."

Mark's face went purple, but Ben pacified him hastily: "Don't answer her, Mark. She doesn't know what she's saying. You know how it is with these things."

"The only reason he married me was to save money on a housekeeper," she said in a deliberate tone.

"That's right—" Ben encouraged her, patronizingly.

"Are you agreeing with her?" Mark shouted.

"I mean that's right—let her get things off her chest," Ben explained. "It releases tension."

So Livy kept talking and it was wonderful. She said the most insultingly true things about Mark and he didn't dare turn them into argument. She didn't know much about psychiatry, but she accused him of all the terms she could remember. It was the first time she had examined out loud the facts of her limitation marriage.

"Come to think of it," she concluded, "I don't know why I stayed here this long. As soon as I can get some money together, or a job, I'll let you know my forwarding address."

Then she went to sleep. Ben assured Mark that she seemed to have unburdened her grievances and should have no further disturbances. Her threat to leave he considered mere bravado. He advised rest and a sympathetic attitude.

Taking Ben to the door, Mark thanked him abjectly: "I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Forget it," said Ben. "If we didn't all pitch in and help each other when the footing gets rocky, there'd be no cooperation in this world."

"That's right," Mark said, brightening. "Wasn't it Emerson who pointed out that cooperation is the foundation of civilization?"

"It's always safe to give Emerson

the credit," Ben answered. "Now just don't worry about Livy. If she shows any alarming signs of tension, call me up, day or night, and I'll be glad to do what I can."

It was two months before Livy moved out, actually, and then only because she had no real choice. Finding a job had been harder than she anticipated. She had no experience and the best part of the day to go job-hunting had usually been taken up by cooking, cleaning, shopping, sending out the laundry, and reading. For she had begun consuming psychology books—both normal and abnormal—searching for a parallel to her condition.

She found roughly similar cases, some which were almost identical in unimportant respects. But the really significant symptom, which urged her on in her hunt, she found nowhere.

None of the systematically deluded women had ever had a baby by an imaginary sweetheart. And Livy, her doctor had told her after the usual tests, was indisputably pregnant.

"But that's impossible," she had protested.

"I thought so myself," the doctor, who was Mark's physician also, had confessed. "But, you see, the profession is full of surprises."

"That isn't what I mean," Livy said in a panic.

She asked for some aromatic spirits in water. She wanted a chance to rehearse her answer. It sounded absurd even to herself.

She and Mark had not changed the basis of her marriage. Mark

couldn't be the father of her child. He wasn't. It was impossible. Under the circumstances, it was absolutely impossible. Yet it was also impossible for her to be pregnant. She had an alibi for every minute of their marriage.

But these days, she realized numbly, when a doctor tells a woman she is going to have a baby, she can start buying a layette. So she shuffled out of the doctor's office, clutching her list of medical instructions, and that night she told Mark.

Mark didn't bark or howl; he called Ben Dashman instead. Ben understood the situation instantly.

"Livy's conscience caused those delusions," he said. "She has obviously been having an affair."

"There was nothing obvious about it," Livy said. "It was so *unobvious*, in fact, that I didn't know about it myself."

This time Ben Dashman's presence didn't stop Mark from losing his temper. "Are you denying," he yelled, "that you *have* been having an affair?"

"Certainly," said Livy. "I'd know about it, wouldn't I?"

"Well, that's a point, Mark," Ben said ponderously. "In the condition Livy's been in lately, she might not have been responsible."

"I'm not going to be responsible, and that's for sure," Mark said. "We'll find out who the man is if we have to dig clean through her unconscious and down to her pituitary gland!"

Mark threw his glasses, the big black-rimmed ones, on the floor and

trampled on them. Livy felt a little proud. She had never seen him so angry before. She had never suspected that she could have such an effect on him, or she might have tried it long ago.

"Livy," Ben said gently, "you do know who the man was, don't you?"

"Sure," she said. "It was my dreamboat, my lover boy—the one who ogled me while I was undressing, the one who tried to get into bed with me. I didn't let him until you convinced me he wasn't real. Then I didn't see any reason to be afraid."

"You mean," said Mark, terrible in his self-control, "right here in the same room with me?"

"Why not?" she asked reasonably. "It was just a delusion. Do I go around censoring *your* dreams? Though heaven knows they're probably just about selling campaigns and how to make people battery-conscious!"

Ben waved Mark to silence. "Then am I to understand," he said, "that your only meetings with your so-called dreamboat have been here in your own bedroom, with your husband asleep in the next bed?"

"That's right," Livy said. "Exactly."

Ben stood up and pointed unpleasantly at Mark. "You," he said nastily, "are an ungrateful, inconsiderate, lying scoundrel."

"I am?" Mark asked, baffled out of his outrage. "How do you figure that, Ben?"

"Because for some obscure reason you're trying to blacken the name of

your wife, when it's perfectly clear that the only man who could be the father is you."

"Oh, no! I can prove it isn't!"

"I'll bet," Livy said, "he could at that. But he doesn't have to, Ben. I'll give him an affidavit that he isn't."

"You see?" Mark cried triumphantly.

Ben nodded. "I guess I do. Livy, I respect your gallantry, but it's a mistake to protect the guilty party."

"You don't catch me getting gallant at a time like this," Livy said. "I can't tell you his name, because I don't know it, but I'll be glad to tell you who he is."

She described the phantom who loved her.

"Blue feathers!" yelled Mark. "Blond eyes! She isn't crazy, Ben. Oh, no, she thinks *we* are!"

Ben stood up. "Mark, I think we need a conference." Mark followed him unwillingly and when Livy opened the door carefully, a few moments later, she heard Ben say, "I've read about cases like this. It's a very grave, very deep disturbance—too deep for me to handle, though I'd love to try and I believe I'd do pretty well. But the first thing she needs is protection. From herself and this unscrupulous vandal she imagines has blue plumage and blond eyes."

And Mark asked, "Then you think she really believes this nonsense?"

And Ben said, "Of course, poor girl. She's batty. Use your head."

And Mark said slowly, "I never thought of that. But why would she claim he's invisible?"

Livy could picture Ben lifting his fat shoulders. "It might take months or years to find out, and the important thing right now is to protect her. That wouldn't hurt you either, Mark. Nobody puts any stock in what a patient at a rest home says."

There was more discussion, but Livy didn't stay to hear it. She had climbed out the kitchen window and over the low backyard fence. Finding a taxi took a while, but she got downtown and closed out her savings account.

Now all she had to do was find a place to live. She couldn't go back to Mark, of course, and she had some bad moments imagining that her description had been broadcast and that she would be picked up and sent to an asylum. She wasn't worried for herself. But lover boy might not find her, and she wouldn't be able to get out and search for him.

Among the classified ads she came across a two-room furnished apartment. It turned out to be across the street from a lumber yard, far enough away from Mark to be relatively safe; and the rental was low. She could live on her savings until the baby was born. What would happen after that didn't seem to matter much right now.

When she went to bed, she felt strangely alone. It wasn't Mark sleeping in the other bed that she missed. She had felt alone in the same room with him up until she thought up Dreamboat. Where was *he*? She squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated. No, he wasn't there. Mark's house must have been the

special habitat of that particular hallucination.

She disliked facing Mark again, and perhaps Ben too, but there apparently was no other way to bring back her blue-plumed, stunning mental phantom. She dressed and called a cab.

There was a light in the bedroom, but she saved investigating that for last. She let herself in with her own key and took off her shoes, then slid through all the other rooms with her eyes firmly shut. Establishing no contact, she opened the bedroom door—and there he was.

His lips were grim, his cleft chin jutted, his blond eyes were savage, and he held his fists in uppercut position as he crouched like a boxer over Mark's raging face. He seemed to be rapping out some harsh words, but even Livy couldn't understand him.

"You stinker," she heard Mark snarl. "You hit me when I wasn't looking."

And Ben protested, "Don't be an idiot. Your unconscious is punishing you for the way you treated that sweet, troubled girl. I can show you cases just like yours—"

And Mark said, "Are you telling me I walked into something?"

Ben told him in a calm voice, "Every psychiatrist knows about the unconscious wish for punishment."

Mark yelled, "There's nothing unconscious about my wish to sock you on that fat jaw." And he did.

Lover boy looked past the battle and saw her in the doorway. His angry face brought forth a slow, un-

earthly smile, and he walked carefully around the fighting fat men and took her hand. It may have been her imagination, but she *felt* the passionately warm, hard flesh.

She had to open her eyes outside the house and on the way back to her apartment. But she held desperately to his hand.

It was after she came home from the hospital that Ben found her. He told her he had heard of mothers radiating, but that this was the first time he had seen it. She could feel the glow in her face as she showed him the empty crib.

"I know you can't see him," she said, "but I can when I close my eyes. He's a beautiful baby. He has his father's features."

"You caused a little stir at the hospital," Ben said. "That's how I found you."

She laughed. "Oh, you mean the doctor? I thought he'd order himself a straitjacket."

"Well, delivering an invisible baby is no joke, especially when you're called away from a stag party," Ben said soberly. "He was finally convinced that it was only the liquor, but he hasn't touched a drop since. They never did discover the baby, did they?"

"I had it in my room all the time. They were afraid I'd sue and give them a lot of bad publicity, but I said it was all right." She turned away from the crib. "I don't suppose Mark minded the Reno divorce, did he?"

"He knew he was getting off lucky. These kissless-marriage annulments can drive a man to changing

his name and moving to another state. But tell me, Livy, how did you arrange the second marriage?"

"By telephone," she said. "I guess you've heard the groom's name and birthplace."

Ben hissed on his glasses, wiped them meticulously. "There was some mention in the newspapers."

"Clrkxstyl 93J16," she said gaily. "I call him Clark for short. And he comes from Alpha Centauri somewhere. I wouldn't have known that, except he learned to use a typewriter—we don't hear the same frequencies, he says."

Ben's eyes slid away from hers and looked around the shabby apartment. "Well, you do seem happy, I must say."

"There's only one thing that bothers me," she said. "Clark could have picked any woman on Earth. I'm about as average as you can get without being a freak. Why did he want *me*?"

"There's no explaining love," Ben evaded uneasily. He put his pudgy hand in his inside pocket and looked directly at her. "Let's not have any false pride," he said. "You haven't asked Mark for a cent, but you have no income and I'd be glad—"

"Oh, we're doing fine," said Livy, shaking her hair, which she had let grow long and straight with no sign of a permanent. "We're getting a raise soon."

"A raise?" Ben was surprised. "From where? For doing what?"

"I'm supposed to be working for Grant's Detective Agency. But it's

really Clark who's the operative—private eye, he calls it now, after reading all those mystery stories—and he types up the reports. All I have to do is correct his English now and then. Imagine, he's even learning slang. Grant can't figure out how we get information that's so hard to uncover, but it's easier than pie for Clark."

"Sure," said Ben, going to the door. "But what are you laughing at?"

"Those blue feathers. They tickle!"

Although Ben could have dropped the situation there, there was one thing you could say for him: he was conscientious. He made one more investigation.

"What do you want to know about her for?" Mr. Grant asked coldly and suspiciously.

"I'm a friend of hers," Ben explained, handing Grant his business card. "I just want to make sure she's earning a good living. She divorced a—well, somebody I used to know, and she wouldn't take any alimony. I offered to help out, but she said she's doing all right working for you."

Grant's professionally slitted eyes developed a glint of smug possession. "Oh, I was afraid you might want to hire her away from me," he said. "That girl is the best operative I ever had. She could shadow a nervous sparrow. Why, she's got methods—"

"Good, huh?"

"Good?" repeated Grant. "You'd think she was invisible!"

Only one thing to do with

a hungry husband. Feed

him. But to what?

the THING

"I was born hungry on a lean farm where from February to April the only food was salt pork and shriveled potatoes," writes Wright, from the more lush Pennsylvania acres where he now raises squabs, goats, apples, ornamental evergreens and occasional stories. His early experiences with undernourishment probably explain the delicate, knowing touch with which he treats of it in this masterpiece of brittle horror. Talk about blood-chilling!

GRANDMA COTTEN was on her way to the springhouse to thaw out old Amos. All week long she had felt winter was over, ever since the later afternoon light had held more blue than purple in it. She was now certain, having seen fuzz on the buds of the pussywillows.

She had started at dawn, first setting the washboiler bubbling on the kitchen stove, then building a fire outside under the soap kettle, so there would be plenty of hot water to soak the frost out of him. She had made sure there was food left too, enough cornmeal and bacon to see them through to the June peas and the milk Betsy would give starting April when she calved.

Now Grandma felt quivery, anxious to see him, the elated way she had felt in those first years when he would come back whistling from his ship. To stop the trembling she pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders, stepping over the places where the sun had melted through the snow, the brown spots that marked the months since that morning when she had put him away in the springhouse.

It hadn't been as lonely as she had expected, living back there in that one room of the squat farmhouse, parcelling out to herself the mouthfuls of mush and tea, the way in the early days every Vermont woman had to do, watching the scissors of

WALDO CARLTON WRIGHT

on the snow

the hills clip the days shorter and shorter as the northeasterners came, creaking the pins of the old house.

Even when she lay awake in the darkness and ran her hand over the cold sheets where old Amos had lain so long beside her, she never doubted that he was merely asleep. All through those months nothing had broken her belief that this had been the way to keep him alive. That is, nothing but the one exception, the beast looking more than anything else like a hank of black wool dragged along the ground.

THEIR trouble had started with her breaking her glasses last spring, the night before the late frost that nipped the apple blossoms and wilted the tobacco seedlings she and Amos had set out in the back field.

Resetting with plants from Montpelier had thrown them late getting in the potatoes. And when the tobacco was knee high, ready to strip, the hail did that for them, shredding the leaves into worthless ribbons, not

enough to make it worth while putting into the curing shed.

Then right after the hail the potatoes blighted and within three days the vines were twisted and brown. When Grandma dug them with the tined-fork, there was only a bushel, no bigger than walnuts.

Hallowe'en, Betsy dried up, a month ahead of time, cutting off their butter and milk for cooking. But somehow Amos didn't seem upset by any of this bad luck. He just went on reading his Bible at night and spending more and more time sitting staring into the fire.

He ate more too. It wasn't as if Grandma's father hadn't warned her about these New Hampshiremen, long before she married Amos.

"Men down that way are mostly seafarin' stock," he had said. "Appetites like draft horses. You'll never be able to right fill him up."

Not that Amos hadn't turned out to be a good provider, once he had given up the sea, that is, and set his hand to farming their upland. He

could pitch two loads of hay to any Vermonter, having the chest and arm muscles of a seafaring man. But now he was seventy-eight, come spring, spending most of the daylight dozing by the fire. Not that it was so bad having him underfoot as his tarnation appetite, like her father had warned her.

It was Thanksgiving morning while she was laying the strips of bacon over the top of the pot of beans that she got the idea. Something about covering the beans made her recollect a tale her grandfather used to tell her. It had happened a hundred years ago in the next county, when this whole part of Vermont still belonged to New Hampshire and the Indians used to sweep down every fall, burning the barns and driving off the cattle.

Her grandfather had been just a young shaver one year the food ran low, but he could remember what they had done with the old folks—how they had built pine boxes and carted them out to the lodge.

She glanced over at Amos, feeling guilty at her thought. He was yawning, bending over to draw on his felt boots. It would keep him from suffering, she told herself, for he so loved to eat. Now it was dropping below zero at night, it wasn't a mite too soon. She would start it, tonight.

When he closed the door on his way to the barn to throw a bundle of fodder into Betsy's rack, Grandma knew there was no time to lose. She would need something to make him sleepy. The hard cider half frozen in the entry would mix well with

the beans. She spooned out a place in the pot and poured in a cupful.

By the time he was back, smelling of the stall, she had his last meal on the table, his plate piled high with beans, a spiced pearmain right on the rim and a mould of upturned red jelly at his elbow.

She dallied with her fork, watching him while he scooped up the beans, gulping them and smacking his lips.

"Martha, you're still the best cook in Vermont," he said, pushing back his plate and walking over to the mantel for his pipe. She watched him cram the bowl with dried leaf from a last year's hank she had brought down the day before from the loft.

Somehow that evening it seemed fitting he should read to her from the Book. When she had drawn her cane chair up to the fire and placed her knitting basket on her knee, she nodded when he looked at her, the way he always did, to see if she wanted him to read aloud.

He picked up the Book from the table by the window, where she kept her geraniums; and settling into the rocker, he carefully opened it at the red ribbon.

"Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink, nor yet for your body; what ye shall put on."

The words seemed to fit into what she had decided. He closed the Book, leaned back and stared into the fire. She stopped knitting, watching him. The words made it right and proper, the only way out.

Now the wind that had been making the pins of the old house creak died away and the old house seemed to be holding its breath, listening with her for the first sound that would show he was asleep, the first fluttering like the open stop on an old melodeon.

At the sound she knew she must hurry. She lit the lantern and set it on the window sill where it would shine on the porch and into the yard. She dropped to her knees and carefully pulled off his felt boots. Then she kicked off her house slippers and slid her feet into the boots. They smelled of the stall, hot and moist like manure. Then she rolled down his socks and unbuttoned his faded blue shirt.

Have to let the zero air get to him fast, she remembered, the way her grandfather had explained the pioneers did it to their old folks. The cold had to freeze them in a jiffy, turning them solid, like fish gigged through the ice.

Amos was still snoring, bolt upright in the rocker, his head back on the antimacassar, his mouth open, his breath fluttering his lips, making the ends of his gray mustache wave like feelers. She reached over, pulled the Book free of his hands and laid it back on the table. She slipped on her mittens, wrapped the shawl around her shoulders and tied a fascinator under her chin. She was ready.

Grasping the back of the rocker, she slid it over the bare planks, like a sled. At the door she wriggled the rungs over the sill to the porch and

so into the yard. The rocker sank into the snow and she had to pull hard to drag it across the yard, halfway to the springhouse where she knew the wind would strike hard and fast. It was already tugging at her fascinator, wriggling under her shawl, flapping at her woolen skirt.

"Rest here, Amos," she tried to say. But her teeth were chattering, the front of her legs burning from the cold. For a second she looked at him, sitting there in the light of the lantern, the seafaring man she had married, now more like a scarecrow left in a winter cornfield. Quickly, to bid him goodbye she stooped over and kissed him on the cheek.

Then turning she shuffled into the house, with the devils of the cold whistling after her. Indoors she swung the wooden bar in place over the door, blew out the lantern and throwing aside her wraps, put another chunk of wood on the fire.

As the eager flames leapt up, she huddled in her chair, shivering, not daring to look toward the window, listening to the flames crackle over the gray wood. Too much of the cold had gotten into her bones, the way it was crawling into Amos, draining the warmth from his bare feet, sliding an icy hand under his blue shirt, circling his heart, the relentless way the flame was turning the log into white crumbling ash. But I'll waken him in the spring, she thought.

Next morning a spot of sunshine stroked her hand, woke her up by its warmth, the way Amos used to stoop over and touch her arm. She

had fallen asleep in her chair, huddled over like a sack of grain all night. She twisted her neck to free it of needles, looking across the room at the table, half expecting to see him sitting there, watching her, smiling with his water-blue eyes. But the place where his chair sat was empty. The fire had gone out in the wood stove, the fireplace was black and the room was stark cold.

She hurried to the window. The jagged limbs of the pines sagged with their burden of white, the roof of the shed and springhouse were padded a foot high with cotton, and the sun shone on a hummock of white in the center of the yard.

She forced her swollen feet into the damp cold boots. She must hurry. Now the sun was up there wasn't a minute to lose.

She grabbed a willow broom from the porch and brushed wildly at the mound of snow, sending it billowing, leaving Amos sitting there upright and almost indignant at the way she had left him. But not the same way.

For his mustache was rigid with frost, his eyes were closed as if he had slept through the night, and except for his gray hair and mustache he looked like the young man she had married, the young seafaring New Hampshireman. The brown splotches on the backs of his hands were white. She pulled off her mitten to touch his cheek, now free of wrinkles. It felt cold and smooth as ice and she drew back, fearing her hand might stick to it, the way fingers will stick to a steel blade.

Inside, I must get him inside at

once, she thought. The sun was shining full in his face but he didn't move or open his eyes. She grabbed the uprights of the chair and slid it through the snow toward the springhouse.

She grabbed the latch of the springhouse door but it didn't budge. The bottom was locked in the ice. She ran to the woodshed, grabbed the hatchet from the nail and hacked at the frozen sill, pulling at the door until she forced it open.

She backed down the steps, pulling at the chair. It had stuck in the drift, but it suddenly gave way and half slid, half fell toward her. She tried to hold it back but the weight of the body pushed her aside, the chair tilted and Amos fell with a thud on the dirt floor of the springhouse beside the trough where she set crocks of milk.

At first, when she had caught her breath, she expected him to sit up and scold her for being so careless. But he didn't protest or even open his eyes. He just lay there half coiled up, like a sleeping groundhog, taking no thought for the morrow, what he should eat or what he should put on.

She pulled the chair to one side and grabbing a burlap sack from a hook, laid it over his head and shoulders, like a quilt. She looked around for another sack to cover his blue feet and vein-lined ankles sticking out below the overalls. But there wasn't anything else. At that she hurried out, slamming the door and driving the hatchet into the sill to make certain the door remained closed until spring.

In the months that followed in the old house she had never doubted that she could wake him up, except on nights when the wind beat sleet against the panes and the timbers of the old house creaked. But by morning her faith returned with the light and she felt he was safe. What mystified her was this, something she could never identify, the hank of black wool dragged along the snow by a rope.

At first she blamed the whiteness of the snow and what it did every winter to her eyes. She knew she should have gone into Somerset last year to have her lenses replaced. But when without really looking up she caught flashes of black out of the corner of her eyes while she mixed the cornmeal or stirred the buckwheat batter at evening, she accepted it as something that was sharing her loneliness and she named the black object the beast, knowing that was what Amos would have called it, had he been there with her.

When she waited at the window, evenings, while the shadows from the pines turned the snow deep purple, it never seemed to come. And then just when she had forgotten about it, there it would be, slipping out of the woods, along the hummock this side of the pines, dipping out of sight where the meadow fell away toward the creek.

If she stood fascinated, waiting until it disappeared, that would be the last glimpse that evening. But if she turned away, she saw something make a quick dash along the edge of the shed, as if somehow it sought

shelter with her for the night.

She always fed Betsy while it was still light, not wanting to meet up with the beast, face to face, have it come dashing around the edge of the barn, running through her legs, upsetting her in the snow.

By January she had come to feel it was her own doubt, slipping into her mind to plague her, being there and yet not a part of her life, as if it were glimpses of Amos, shoveling a path, carrying in wood from the shed, or dragging hay from the rick for Betsy. Then the dusk was too deep to make out his figure but only to show something shapeless moving out there, the way the Thing moved when she wasn't expecting it.

But now the day for the reawakening had come. Now that she had the water boiling in the washboiler in the kitchen and outdoors in the soap kettle, now that the sun was shining full on the springhouse ahead of her and water dripping from icicles over the door, the months that had passed seemed part of a dream hidden under the surface of her mind. That at last she should be about to see Amos again, talk to him, was like holding a letter unopened in the pocket of her apron the way she used to do while he was still at sea.

It was joy held back, but contained inside, surely there, the way he was safe asleep inside the springhouse.

She smiled, thinking of watching his cheeks turn pink, seeing the first flicker of movement come into his face, then watching his eyes open and seeing her, watching his happiness unfold with hers.

Now that she was near the door, her throat ached in eagerness to say his name and when she stooped over to pull the hatchet from the sill, her hand was trembling so that she had to try twice before the hatchet budged.

When the hatchet came away, the door swung open and she hurried inside. It was dark but she could hear the water gurgling in the basin where she kept the crocks of milk. She smelt the mustiness of the old beams and then looking down, the back of her neck suddenly felt numb and his name froze on her lips. For on the floor where Amos had fallen, where she had covered him with the burlap sack, there lay a bundle of rags.

Her eyes raced over the dark room, seeking him, feeling he must be playing a joke on her, hiding. He had to be heré. Her eyes came back to the pile of rags, fumbling over a sleeve of the faded shirt and a leg of the torn overalls.

With a bang the door swung shut and the latch clicked. And in the sudden darkness, Grandma felt her fingers closing tighter around the handle of the hatchet, for mixed with the mustiness of the beams was a new odor that stung her nostrils, the odor of something wild and bitter.

Then along the wall, beyond the bundle of rags, she saw an oval of light, under the stones, where a hole had been dug. And in the hole, she made out an animal, lying there watching her.

Its lower lids hung flabby from the red eyes, the way Amos's eyes had looked that last evening while he was

staring into the fire. Its jaws sagged away from yellow teeth and its black body was stretched out, crouching in the hole, ready to spring.

It was the beast. It was the animal that had cheated her. It had stolen Amos while she had thought he was safe inside the stone house. This was the beast that plagued her dreams. On the very day when she had planned to thaw out Amos, it had turned her hopes into a nightmare.

Now she could see that its tongue was blood red and that its long claws were flexing, eager to leap at her throat.

Deep inside her, fierce anger welled and surged, holding back her sobs, stopped her trembling. She tightened her grip on the hatchet. She had shared her winter with this beast, letting it go its way undisturbed and it had used her need for companionship to rob her.

Grandma struck out, furiously, wildly, lunging at its head, half expecting it to fling itself at her.

But even as she struck, she saw it close its eyes and turn its head, the way Amos had coiled on his side on the floor that morning. The blade cut in dully, the way an ax sinks into a frozen pumpkin, not cutting as much as breaking it apart.

The beast didn't shriek or flail about, but gave a long sigh, like air escaping from a dry pump, as though it were quite dead before she struck it. Only then did she realize that from then on she would be quite alone and the sobs she had been holding back rose above the gurgling of the water in the basin.

*What could break this Frankenstein,
impervious to the wiles of men? The
woman, Juanita, thought she knew*

dear AUTOMATON

A. E. van VOGT

*Science fiction fans, notoriously partisan when it comes to favorite authors, disagree violently about just who is the current Shakespeare of the medium. But they concede that A. E. van Vogt is getting the most votes. A peerless master of the science short story, he has also engineered numbers of novelettes and two full novels, *The House That Stood Still* and *Weapon Shops of Ishtar*. His distinction lies not only in his craftsmanship, but in the thematic underpinning which supplies his work with a durability and significance not generally found in the popular literature of our time. In this story, for example, he hews to a theme which has long preoccupied those who peer into the future—the possible subjugation of man by machines created in his image.*

THE HUMAN automaton stirred uneasily in his small, almost invisible plane. His eyes strained into the visiplat, scanning the sky ahead. Out of the blue came two flashes of fire. Instantly, the plane careened as if struck from a double blow.

It fell slowly at first, then more rapidly, down into the enemy lines. As the Earth came near, a resisting mechanism went into operation. The rate of fall grew slower. The automaton had time to see that there was a vast ruin of a city below. Soundlessly, the tiny machine settled into the shelter of the crumbled base of what had once been a building.

A moment passed, then the radio beside him sibilated. Voices strange to him were talking to each other.

"Bill!" said the first voice.

"Shoot!"

"Did we get him?"

"Don't think so. Not permanently, anyway. I think he went down under at least partial control, though it's hard to tell with that safety device they have. My guess is he's down there somewhere with his motor shut off."

"I think we disabled him."

"Well, then you know the routine—when one of 'em is cornered just inside our lines. Do your psychology stuff. I'll call the *Vulture*."

"Don't pass the buck to me. I'm sick of spouting those lines. You give 'em!"

"All right. Shoot me the come-on!"

"Hm-mm. . . he's down there. Think we ought to go after him?"

"Naw! The automatons they send out this far are basically the clever ones. That means we couldn't capture him. He'd be just fast enough on the uptake to make it necessary for us to kill him, and who the devil wants to kill those poor, tortured slaves?—Did you get his picture?"

"Yep, he was listening with an intent look on his face. Fine looking chap. . . . It's funny, and kind of terrible how all this started, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Wonder what this guy's number is."

There was a distinct pause. The automaton stirred uneasily. His number? Ninety-two, of course. What else? The voice was speaking again:

"Poor fellow probably doesn't remember that he once had a name."

The other voice said, "Who'd have thought when they first made a hu-

man duplicate—flesh and blood and bones and all—that today, only fifty years later, we'd be fighting for our lives against people who look exactly like us, except that they're natural eunuchs."

The automaton listened with vague attention, as the two men went on talking. Every little while he nodded as their words reminded him of something he had almost forgotten. The human duplicates had first been called robots. They had resented that name, and changed it around to make Tobor, and that stuck. The Tobors proved to be very effective scientists, and at first no one noticed how rapidly they took over scientific posts in every part of the world. Nor was it immediately noticed that the Tobors were secretly carrying on a duplication campaign on a tremendous scale. The great shock to the human masses came when Tobor-infiltrated governments on each continent simultaneously enacted laws declaring duplication would henceforth be the only means of procreation. Sex was forbidden under penalty of a fine for the first offense, then imprisonment, and then, for recalcitrants, the Tobor-invented process of being made into an automaton.

A special police organization—which turned out to be already in existence—was set up to administer the new law. Tobor enforcement officers swung into action immediately, and there was some street fighting on that first day. Neither side even thought of compromise, so within two weeks full-scale war was raging.

The account ended, as Bill said:

"I guess he's heard enough. Come on, let's go."

There was muffled laughter, then silence.

The automaton waited, disturbed. Sketchy memories were in his mind of a past when there had been no war, and, somewhere, there was a girl, and another world.

The unreal pictures faded. And again there was only this ship that clothed his body in almost form-fitting metal. There was the need to go on, aerial pictures to be taken. . . . Must get up into the air!

He felt the ship tug in response to his urgent thought, but no movement followed. For seconds, he lay lethargically, then came a second urge for flight. Once more the tiny ship writhed with effort, but no upward movement resulted.

This time the automaton had the slow thought: "Something must have fallen across the ship, and is holding it down. . . . Have to go out and remove it. . . ."

He squirmed against the metal and padding that encased him. Sweat poured down his cheeks, but presently he stood free in ankle-deep dust. As he had been trained to do on such occasions, he checked his equipment . . . weapons, tools, gas mask—

He flung himself flat on the ground as a great, dark ship swooped down out of the sky, and settled to the ground several hundred yards away. From his prone position, the automaton watched it, but there was no sign of movement now. Puzzled, the automaton climbed to his feet.

He recalled that one of the men on the radio had said a *Vulture* had been called.

So they had been playing a trick on him, pretending to go away. Clearly visible on the ship's hull was the name: *Vulture 121*.

Its appearance seemed to suggest that an attack was to be made. His strong, determined mouth tightened. They'd soon learn it didn't pay to meddle with a Tobor slave.

Die for Tobor, mighty Tobor. . .

Tensely, the young woman watched as her pilot lowered the high-speed plane toward the leveled ruin of the city where the *Vulture* lay. The big ship was unmistakable. It towered above the highest remnant of shattered wall. It was a black bulk against the gray-dark sameness of the rubble.

There was a bump and she was out of the machine, clutching her bag. Twice, her right ankle twisted cruelly as she raced over the uneven ground. Breathlessly, she ran up the narrow gangplank.

A steel door clicked open. As she hurried inside, she glanced behind her. The door clanged shut; and she realized gratefully that she was safe.

She stopped, as her eyes had to accustom themselves to the dim metal room. After a moment she saw a little group of men. One of them, a small individual with glasses and a thin face, stepped forward. He took the suitcase from her with one hand, and with the other, he grabbed her hand, and shook it warmly.

"Good girl!" he said. "That was

well and swiftly run, Miss Harding. I'm sure no spying ship of the robots could have identified you in any way during the half-minute you were exposed. Oh, pardon me."

He smiled. "I shouldn't be calling them robots, should I? They've reversed all that, haven't they? Tobors is their name. It does have more rhythm and should be psychologically more satisfying to them. There now, you've caught your breath. By the way, I'm Doctor Claremeyer."

"Doctor!" Juanita Harding managed to say. "Are you sure it's he?"

"Definitely, your fiancé, John Gregson, chemist extraordinary." . . . It was a younger man who spoke. He stepped forward and took the suitcase from the older man's fingers. "The patrol got the picture by the new process, whereby we tune in on their communicating plates. It was flashed to headquarters, then to us."

He paused, and smiled engagingly. "My name is Madden. That's Phillips with the long, gloomy face. The big fellow with the uncombed hair, lurking there in the background like an elephant, is Rice, our field man. And you've already met Doctor Claremeyer."

Rice said gruffly, "We've got a hell of a job here, ma'am."

Miss Harding took off her hat with a brisk sweep of one hand. The shadows retreated from her face into her eyes, but there was a hint of a smile on her lips.

The young man called Madden took up the story grimly. "We had the good fortune to be in the air near here when the first report came

through that an automaton had been brought down alive. As soon as the identification arrived, we asked army headquarters to set up a defense ring of all available planes. They stripped the entire nearby line to help us."

He paused, frowning. "It had to be very carefully done, because we don't want to give the Tobors any idea of what's going on. Your fiancé can't get away; that is certain, I think. And he can't be rescued unless they come out in force of a size that catches us off guard. Our big problem is to capture him alive."

"And that, of course—" It was Claremeyer, who cut in with a shrug of his shoulders—"may be easy or it may be difficult. Unfortunately it must be fast. The Tobors will not be unaware long of this concentration of forces, then they will examine his file, analyze at least a part of the true situation, and act."

"The second unfortunate aspect is that in the past we have allowed ourselves a percentage of failures. You must realize that our tactics are almost entirely psychological, based upon fundamental human impulses."

Patience, he explained the method.

"Ninety-two . . . This is Sorn speaking."

The voice came sharp, insistent, commanding, from the automaton's wrist radio. The automaton stirred in his shelter. "Yes, Master?"

Apparently, the contact was all that was desired, for he heard the other say, "He's still alive!" The voice was farther away this time, as if the humanoid had turned to speak to someone else.

A second voice spoke hesitantly, "Normally, I wouldn't have bothered, but this is the one that destroyed his file. Now, a *Vulture* crew is trying to save him."

"They do it every time."

"I know, I know." The second speaker sounded impatient with himself, as if he was aware that he might be acting foolishly. "Still, they've already given a lot of time to him, more than normal, it seems to me. And there is the fact that this particular ship was engaged in a lengthy series of code messages with its headquarters. Afterward, a woman arrived on the scene."

"They nearly always use women in these rescue operations." The Tobor's voice held a note of distaste.

This time there was silence for many seconds. Finally, the doubting one spoke again, "In my department, I have been acutely aware that about two years ago we unexpectedly captured a human chemist who, it was stated, had discovered a process for sexualizing Tobors."

His emotional disgust was almost too much for him, and in spite of the frankness of his next words, his voice trembled. "Unfortunately, we learned of this too late for us to identify the individual involved. Apparently, he was put through a routine interview, and dementalized."

He had full control of himself again and went on sardonically. "Of course the whole thing could be just a propaganda story, designed to unnerve us. And yet, at the time, our Intelligence reported that an atmosphere of gloom and depression per-

vaded human headquarters. It appears that we raided a city, captured him in his home, wrecked his laboratory and burned his papers."

His tone implied that he was shrugging. "It was one of scores of similar raids, quite impossible to identify."

Once more, silence . . . then . . . "Shall I order him to kill himself?"

"Find out if he has a weapon."

There was a pause. The voice came close, "Have you a blaster, Ninety-two?"

The human automaton, who had listened to the conversation with a faraway blankness in his eyes and mind, alerted as the question was directed at him through his wrist radio.

"I have hand weapons," he said dully.

Once more the interrogator turned away from the distant microphone. "Well?" he said.

"Direct action is too dangerous," said the second Tobor. "You know how they resist actual suicide. The will to live is too basic."

"Then what—?"

"Tell him specifically to defend himself to the death. That's on a different level. That's an appeal to his loyalty, to his indoctrinated hatred of our human enemies and to his patriotism to the Tobor cause."

Lying in the rubble, the automaton nodded as the Master's firm voice issued the commands. Naturally . . . to the death . . . of course.

On the radio, Sorn still sounded dissatisfied. "I think we should force the issue. I think we should con-

centrate projectors in the area, and see what happens."

"They've always accepted such challenges in the past."

"Up to a point only. I believe most earnestly that we should test their reaction. I feel that this man resisted too hard during his captivity and there's a tremendous pressure working on him."

"Human beings are very deceptive," said the other doubtfully. "Some of them are merely anxious to go home. It seems to be a powerful motivation."

His objection must have been rhetorical. After a bare moment of silence, he looked up and said decisively, "Very well, we'll attack!"

By an hour after dark, a hundred projectors were engaged on both sides. The night flashed with long trailers of bright flame.

"Phew!" Rice raced up the gangplank into the ship. His heavy face was scarlet with effort. As the door clanged shut behind him, he gasped, "Miss Harding, that fiancé of yours is a dangerous man. He's trigger happy, and needs more propaganda."

The girl was pale. She had watched Rice's attempt to get the screen into position from the great barrier window in the observation room. She said "Maybe I should go out now!"

"And get buried!" Doctor Claremeyer came forward. He was blinking behind his glasses. "Now, don't you feel badly, Miss Harding. I know it seems incredible that the man who loves you has been so changed that he would kill you on sight—but

you'll just have to accept the reality. The fact that the Tobors have decided to put up a fight for him hasn't helped matters any."

"Those beasts!" she said. It was a dry sob. "What are you going to do now?"

"More propaganda."

"You think he'll hear it over the roar of the projectors?"

Doctor Claremeyer said matter-of-factly, "The pattern has been established. Even a single word coming through will be a reminder of the whole pattern."

A few moments later, she was listening gloomily while the loud speakers blared their message:

"... You are a human being. We are human beings. You were captured by the robots. We want to rescue you from the robots. These robots call themselves Tobors because it sounds better. They're robots. They're not human beings, but you are a human being. We are human beings, and we want to rescue you. Do everything that we ask you to do. Do nothing that they tell you to do. We want to make you well. . . ."

Abruptly, the ship moved. A moment later, the *Vulture* commander came over.

"I had to give the order to take off," he said. "We'll come back again about dawn. The Tobors must be losing equipment at a terrific rate. It's a bridgehead fight for them, but it's getting too hot for us also."

He must have felt the girl would place the worst construction on the withdrawal order. He explained to her in a low voice:

"We can depend on a slave using every precaution to stay alive. He'll have been given training for that. Besides, we did get the screen up and the picture will show over and over."

He went on, before she could speak, "Besides, we have been given permission to try direct contact with him."

"What does that mean?"

"We'll use a weak signal that won't carry more than a few hundred yards. That way they won't be able to tune in on what we're saying. Our hope is that he'll be sufficiently stimulated to tell us his secret formula."

Juanita Harding sat for a long time, frowning. Her comment, when it finally came, was extremely feminine. "I'm not sure," she said, "that I approve of the pictures you're showing on that screen."

The commander said judiciously, "We've got to strike at the basic drives of human beings."

He departed hastily.

John Gregson, who had been an automaton, became aware that he was clawing at a bright screen. As he grew more conscious of his actions, he slowed his frantic attempt to grasp at the elusive shapes that had lured him out of hiding. He stepped back.

All around him was intense darkness. As he backed away a little further, he stumbled over a twisted girder. He started to fall, but saved himself by grasping at the burned and rusted metal.

He retreated anxiously into the

darkness to take better advantage of the light reflections. For the first time he recognized that he was in one of the destroyed cities. He thought: "But how did I get here?"

A voice from his wrist radio made him jump. "Sorn!" it said insistently. The icy tone stiffened Gregson. Deep in his mind a bell of recognition clanged its first warning. He was about to reply, when he realized that it was not he who had been addressed.

"Yes?" The answer was clear enough, but it seemed to come from a much greater distance.

"Where are you now?"

Sorn said slowly, "I landed about half a mile from the screen. It was a misjudgment, as I intended to come down much closer. Unfortunately, in landing I got my directions twisted."

"The screen they're using for the pictures is still up. I can see a reflection of it in Ninety-two's Wristo. Surely, it'll be a bright landmark."

"It must be in a hollow, or behind a pile of debris. I'm in pitch darkness. Contact Ninety-two and—"

The first reference to his *number* had started the train of associations. The second one brought such a flood of hideous memory that Gregson cringed. In a flashing kaleidoscope of pictures, he realized his situation and tried to recall the immediate sequence of events that had brought him back to control of himself. Somebody called his name insistently . . . not his number—his name. Each time they had asked him a question, something about a formula for—for what? He couldn't remember, some-

thing about—about—Abruptly, it came back!

Crouching there in the darkness, he closed his eyes in a sheer physical reaction. "I gave it to them. I told them the formula. But who was—them?"

It could only have been some member of the crew of a *Vulture* ship, he told himself shakily. The Tobors didn't know his name. To them he was . . . Ninety-two.

That recollection brought him back with a start to his own predicament. He was just in time to hear the voice on the Wristo say vindictively:

"All right, I've got it. I'll be over there in ten minutes."

The Tobor in the distant Control Center was impersonal. "This is on your own head, Sorn. You seem to have an obsession about this case."

"They were broadcasting to him on a local wave," said Sorn in a dark voice, "so direct, so close that we couldn't catch what they were saying. And his answer, when he finally made it, was interfered with so that, again, we didn't hear it, but it was a formula of some kind. I'm counting on the possibility that he was not able to give them the full description. Since he's still at the screen, he hasn't been rescued, so if I can kill him now, within minutes—"

There was a click . . . the voice trailed off into silence. Gregson stood in the darkness beside the screen, and shudderingly considered his position.

Where was the *Vulture*? The sky was pitch dark, though there was an ever-so-faint light in the East, the

first herald of the coming dawn. The sound of the projectors had become a mutter far away, no longer threatening. The great battle of the night was over.

. . . The battle of the individuals was about to begin. . . .

Gregson retreated even farther into the darkness, and fumbled over his body for hand weapons. He stopped the thought. Once again, desperate now, he searched himself. . . . Nothing. He guessed that in his mad scramble to get to the screen, he had lost his weapons.

He was still teetering indecisively when he heard a movement.

Vulture 121 landed gently in the intense darkness of the false dawn. Juanita Harding had taken off her clothes, and now had a robe wrapped around her. She did not hesitate when Rice beckoned. He grinned at her reassuringly.

"I'm taking a cylinder of the stuff," he said, "just in case he doesn't become inspired quickly enough."

She smiled wanly, but said nothing. Doctor Claremeyer came to the door with them. He gave her hand a quick squeeze.

"Remember," he said, "this is war!"

She replied, "I know. And all's fair in love and war, isn't it?"

A moment later they were gone into the night.

Gregson was retreating in earnest and he felt a lot better. It was going to be hard for any one person to locate him in this vast maze of shattered concrete and metal.

Moment by moment, however, the

desolate horizon grew lighter. He saw the ship suddenly in the shadowy ruins to his right. Its shape was unmistakable. *Vulture!* Gregson raced toward it over the uneven ruins of what had once been a paved street.

Gasping with relief, he saw that the gangplank was down. As he raced up to it, two men covered him with their blasters. Abruptly, one of them gasped, "It's Gregson!"

Weapons were scraped back into their leathery holsters. Hands grasped eagerly at his hands, and there was a pumping of arms. Eyes searched his face eagerly for signs of sanity, found them, and glowed with pleasure. A thousand words attacked the dawn air.

"We got your formula."

"Great . . . wonderful."

"The genius made up some of the hormone gas in our own ship lab. How fast does it work?"

Gregson guessed that the "genius" was the tall, gloomy individual who had been introduced as Phillips. He said, "It takes only a few seconds. After all, you breathe it in and it's taken right into your blood-stream. It's pretty powerful stuff."

Madden said, "We had some idea of using it to intensify your own reactions. In fact, Rice took some—" He stopped. "But just a minute," he said, "Rice and Miss Harding are—" He stopped again.

It was the small man, Doctor Claremeyer, who took up the thread of Madden's thought. "Mr. Gregson," he said, "we saw a man on our infra-red plates heading for the screen. He was too far away to iden-

tify, so we took it for granted it was you. And so, Rice and Miss Harding went out and—"

The Commander cut him off at that point. "Quick, let's get out there! It may be a trap!"

Gregson scarcely heard that. He was already racing down the gangplank.

"Sorn!" The voice on the Wristo sounded impatient. "Sorn, what's happened to you?"

In the half-darkness near the screen, the men and the girl listened to the words of the Tobor on Gregson's Wristo. From their vantage point they watched Sorn looking at the pictures on the screen itself.

"Sorn, your last report was that you were near where Ninety-two was last known to be hiding—"

Rice put one plump hand over Gregson's Wristo, to block off the sound; and whispered, "That's when I let him have it. Boy, I never had a better idea than when I took along a cylinder of your gas, Gregson. I shot a dose of it at him from fifty feet, and he never knew what hit him."

"—Sorn, I know you're still alive. I can hear you mumbling to yourself."

Rice said, "We'll have to be careful of our dosage in the future. He's practically ready to eat up the pictures. You can see for yourself—the Tobor-human war is as good as over."

Gregson watched silently as the one-time Tobor leader scrambled eagerly in front of the screen. A dozen girls were on parade beside a pool. Periodically, they would all dive into

the water. There would be a flash of long, bare limbs, the glint of a tanned back, then they would all climb out. They did that over and over.

The trouble was, each time Sorn tried to grasp one of the images, his shadow fell across the screen and blotted her out. Frustrated, he rushed to another, only to have the same thing happen again.

"Sorn, answer me!"

This time the Tobor paused. The

reply he made then must have shocked the entire Tobor headquarters, and the effect reached out to all the Tobor armies around the world.

Gregson tightened his arm appreciatively around Juanita's waist (she still wore her robe over the beauty with which she was to have lured him back to safety) as he listened to the fateful words.

"Women," Sorn was saying, "they're wonderful!"

Very Short Story

A woman entered a bank and placed \$10, which she wished to deposit, in front of the cashier. He pushed out the bank book and said, "Sign here, please."

"My whole name?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Before I was married?"

"No, just as it is now."

"And my husband's name, too?"

"Sign your name, Mrs., followed by your husband's name; or Mrs., your Christian name, and then your husband's name; or Mrs. and your husband's full name; or merely sign your Christian name and your husband's surname. Write it as you are in the habit of signing it."

"But, sir," replied the woman, "I can't write."

—*Dublin Opinion*

Specials For Science Fiction Fans

RECENTLY the Hayden Planetarium announced 18,000 persons had signed reservation blanks indicating a desire to be a passenger on the first interplanetary rocket to leave the earth. These are filed in the archives of the American Museum of Natural History. Each prospective passenger received a space ship time schedule—figured for a speed of 25,000 miles an hour—which placed the moon 9½ hours away.

The planetarium warned these prospective passengers it could not be responsible for delays en route.

—*New York Herald Tribune*

RUSSELL BRANCH

RIP TIDE

As in music, so in fiction. Unwilling to tread well-worn paths simply because they are safe, the experimenters of each generation strike out in new directions. Sometimes they lose themselves, and cacaphony results. Occasionally they hit on something—a wondrous modulation, an unprecedented harmony, a rhythm strange to the ears but closer to the heart. Of course, such explorers take their lumps in their hands. Brahms and Wagner were boned no more than the unsung hero who devised the first sonnet. Russell Branch had his nerve, expecting to find publication for a story so radically shaped, so unexpectedly poetic, so fresh.

Fortunately, SUSANNE has no taboos. And it knows a happy marriage of form and content when it sees one. This lyrical treatment of a passion crime may ring a bit strange at first, but we predict the melody will linger on.

Sea lifting, girl jilting,

kissing killer, thriller diller

BURNING sun and shimmering sand, burning sand and shimmering sea. Haze of heat; squint the eyes. Dark-skinned girl with ash-blond hair, skin-tight suit of velvet black. Black the black of secret sin, black the shade of murder.

Lora Walton took me like a slug of gin, on that hot empty afternoon. Two short minutes, and I knew the want. A little longer, two long days, to know the price.

Other fish in the ocean, other women on the beach. Lovely, lush; blonde

and brunette. Redhead as usual at the foot of the tower. Halter loose and legs asunder. Green-eyed greed behind Harlequin glasses. Watching me? I cared no longer.

Run the sand, hit the surf. Flash of arms, twinkle of legs. Under the breaker . . . and empty foam. Joyful toss of a sea-slick head.

I knew Lorà Walton was a swimmer the minute I saw her. Taut smooth line from under-arm to breast. Long firm undermuscle, from shoulder to elbow. Bleach of sun in her hair, golden tan. From following the sun to golden places . . .

Breaker rising, swelling, piling. Sea-green tower . . . a beauty, get it! Power spilling, crashing, rolling.

She got the first big one, came riding it in. Red lips open, face intent. Body curled over, molding the edge. Using it, holding it.

I saw her husband then; the first time. Little guy, partly bald. Scrawny legs, fortyish paunch. Skin that would only get red, and peel, and get red again. She bounced up and grabbed his reluctant hand . . .

Come play with me and be my love, and we shall some new pleasures prove. Of flashing surf and golden nooks . . . of sea-green graves and grappling hooks?

She led him out into the water, splashing, laughing, mocking. Come play with me and be my love . . . except for that quick look she cast back along the beach.

Under the first breaker. Baldy finally up, choking, struggling. She already out beyond his reach, calling, laughing, tempting.

I straightened up.

Baldy off his feet, going out with the back surge. Swimming, if you could call it that. At least his arms were flailing. The next wave came in, a gentle swell, and buoyed him up.

I stood up and blew my whistle. People staring, turning.

Baldy struggled around, looked at me, started to oblige. But the girl was already by his side, frolicking, mocking, showing him how easy it was. Behind them, another wave began to pile up.

My whistle again, two sharp blasts, and angry motions like a traffic cop. Baldy hesitating, uncertain, reluctant. Blondie kicked herself upward, half out of the water, and gave it right back at me, in reverse.

The gesture meant a lot of things. Go on with you, can't you see we're having fun? Sit down again, and rest your big strong muscles. It meant: we're paying for it, and who are you anyway, but a hired hand with a boy whistle?

It meant murder . . . but did I know that then?

More splashes from Baldy, just to show his independence. But he had had enough, he finally came in and flopped on his belly and started working with the suntan oil.

Blondie kicked some more of the Pacific around for a minute, then came in—a hundred yards down the beach. Not even drying herself, just cutting straight across toward the hotel terrace. Baldy quickly gathered up towel and lotion and tagged after her, like a faithful poodle.

Would have sat up and begged myself, for one chance to do the same. But that was the last I had of her, until the next afternoon.

Expensive, exclusive and sophisticated: the *Palma Del Mar*. Lifeguard in the social swim? Not exactly, but money has prerogatives and appetites, particularly money like Irene Monteil. The management only hopes they can be satisfied discreetly, is all. Is everything satisfactory, Mrs. Monteil?

That evening a hungry redhead named Irene Monteil fed me Scotch in a discreet corner of the bar, danced a few discreet steps with me across the floor, maneuvered me into a discreet corner off the discreet loggia.

It was her last night, and if she didn't get out of it what she hoped for—neither did I.

Hangover, fingernail welts on my cheek, lipstick marks on my white tuxedo jacket . . . and not one glimpse of a tall, dark-skinned blonde.

But I got the name the next morning from Sammy the beach boy. Also a wise look. "Want me to park 'em near you, if they take out an umbrella and back rests?"

"Hell, no. Just want to know who I'm dealing with, when I fish him out of the drink. He thinks he's Johnny Weismuller."

Harold B. Walton. Mrs. Harold B. Walton. . .

The morning wore on, the sun got hotter. Redhead gone, but a chunky little brunette had taken her stand. The brunette dropped her straps, too, but her eyes weren't greedy.

Just hopeful—hopeful like mine.

And what could she be finding to do in a hotel room all morning—with a guy like Harry?

I was splicing a new line on a life ring, she was there before I knew it.

"Guard. . ."

Down, straight down into cool, almond eyes slanted up at mine. Unfathomable eyes. Older than her figure, old as sex.

I smiled. "Guy, Guy Sherwood."

She also smiled. A brief, cold smile that made my own grin as silly as a toothpaste ad.

"I'd like to use your board."

I'd like to kill my husband?

"I'd like you to, but—"

"I know how to handle one."

"Rules, Mrs. Walton. Rules and regulations. Part of the lifesaving equipment. . ."

Wandering eyes. She didn't miss a hair. And still waiting expectantly, one eyebrow arched.

I jumped and proved how athletic I was. I lifted and proved how strong I was. Sixteen feet of polished mahogany, all the way to the water's edge.

Harry was standing back away, kicking off his sandals and watching us.

"Ask your husband to take it easy today, will you please?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

She gave the board a shove and was gone. Thank you kindly, Mr. Sherwood? . . . Not even a backward glance.

Ebony against dark mahogany. Ashen hair and smoky skin. White

spume at the crest of a breaker.

Harry looked like a mutt who had lost a bone. I didn't ask him anything. I went back to my platform and picked up my glasses.

They were piling up around the point today. Not breaking, just building up slow and lazy. But if you were an expert, if you could sense the surge and shift of balance with every last muscle and nerve in a knowing body. . .

If you were Lora Walton, in other words, you could ride the downhill ride all the way. All the way in until they started building up again, then over and down the summit for the final burst.

She used the board as she would a man. She caught one and rode it to a fare-thee-well. She waved to her husband gaily—and went back for more.

I watched her all the way, I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Knees down, body crouched, long arms working in even strokes. Heaving ocean and caressing woman, moving as one. The pause, the lift, the surge of power. Gathering speed, the woman coaxing. Beating the crest, keep on ahead. Then knifing the downslope, erect and exultant. . .

I didn't see Harry until she was almost upon him. Out, too far out, paddling gamely like a worried pooch. Watching his wife proudly, watching his love on the flying splinter.

Splinter? Sixteen feet of knife-edged murder.

No one else on the beach saw it, although they were all watching. I wouldn't have been sure myself,

without the glasses. The quick raise of her arm, sure; a friendly greeting. But that subtle shift of weight, that sudden twist of balance?

The board swerved. I saw its sharp nose shoot upward as she threw herself away from it. I thought I had seen Harry duck the instant before. But that was all I had seen before I jumped. The waves were hiding them now, the swelling rolls and the breaker ahead. I kicked down and under, and came up stroking.

They were together when I got out there, and what do you say? Pleasant afternoon, a lovely day?

"Your board's over there, you'd better get it."

Too heavy to lift and too much to handle. This time I dragged it, the hell with the sand.

SHE KNEW, I knew. We met in the bar that evening.

Dim lights and smell of whisky. Soft music and the smell of money. The touch of her hand, and. . .

"Your husband?"

"Too much sun. Poor Harry."

Poor Harry.

"Close call, this afternoon."

"Mmm . . . my cigarette's out. Try it again?"

Almond eyes through smoldering smoke. Hand as cold as the touch of death.

"But you do know how to handle one. The Islands?"

Of course the Islands. Waikiki and the Outrigger Club. Rio, Nassau, and Bermuda, too. Cool linen dresses and the kiss of the sun, long cool drinks and. . .

"Me too, but I work my way."

Cold and wise, the slanted eyebrow. "You think *I* don't?"

And what do you say to that? Nice work, if you can get away with it?

Long slim leg, bare as her shoulders. Long slim finger, flicking the ashes. Ring on the finger, rings on the bar. Rings within rings.

"Dance?"

Honey won't you hold me hold me tight, the night is ours and you are divine all mine. . .

"Sorry."

"Mr. Muscles."

"Mr. Clumsy."

"I think I like you better on the beach."

"Well. . . ?"

"Swim?"

"My trunks are in the locker room . . . locked."

"And Harry's in my room . . . reading."

"Well?"

"Well. . ."

Nice work—if you can get it.

"No . . . NOW, WAIT . . . GUY! . . . first there's something to get straight."

"You mean fun's fun, but I'm just the lifeguard?"

"Silly. I mean this afternoon."

"Accident."

"Of course."

The velvet night, the sighing surf. This night was ours and you were . . . thinking.

"Accidents do happen, sometimes."

"Sometimes."

"And there you are, quick as a flash, Mr. Muscles."

"That's why I'm here."

"Here?"

"You know what I mean. Here. The Palma Del Mar."

"The season's nearly over. Then what?"

"Bermuda, Key West . . . maybe the Royal Hawaiian. You?"

"Honolulu, maybe . . . yes. Are you always the lifeguard?"

"Sometimes I tend bar, sometimes I teach tennis. All depends."

"Lots of ambition, for a husky young man."

"Husky appetite, anyway."

"And you like the work?"

"Well. . ."

"The yes sirs and no sirs, and how are you today, Mrs. Walton?"

"Look. . ."

"When it could be Lora, and how are you this morning, darling?"

"Lora. . ."

"No. I'm not through, let me finish. You—"

"You don't have to finish."

"All right, then."

"But Lora. . ."

"I'm cold, I'm going in."

I was cold, too. But I didn't go in, not for a long time.

Other talks in other places. Same people—with other faces.

"Good morning, Mrs. Walton. How are you today, Mr. Walton?"

"No . . . no, Guy. No!"

"Here, let me. . ."

"I like to pay my way, Lora."

"Harry can afford it. That's all he's got."

"But a guy with that much . . ."

"Are you kidding? He inherited it."

"Two fifty-three, sir, and a quarter for the cigarettes."

"A million and a quarter, in round figures."

"You enjoy being a lifeguard, Sherwood?"

"You meet such interesting people, Mrs. Walton."

I got through the cold layer just once, and that was when she came to me. Slipped into the locker room, just as I was closing up for the night. Plastered herself against me, dripping wet . . . and was gone again before I quite knew what had happened.

There was hot lava, underneath.

THERE was also Harry.

Bald, paunchy, eager little Harry. Harry gaining confidence, Harry gaining skill. Harry the bantam rooster . . . the rooster learning to swim.

At least she made him think he was. She taunted him, encouraged him; she led him out into the deep waters, and filled his cup with oil.

It was never said, it was never spoken. It was just a look and understanding . . . the right circumstances at the right time.

Time and circumstances, time and tide. Late afternoon, sultry overcast. Churning cross-tides, heavy sea. One for the money, two for the show. Twelve for the jury, and here we go . . .

"Mr. Walton . . ."

Million and a quarter—in a round, flabby figure.

"Yes, Sherwood?"

"There's a strong riptide today."

"Well?" That was Mrs. Walton. I wet my lips. "Undertow, too."

"Yes?"

Our eyes touched bottom. "Frankly, Mrs. Walton, I wish that . . . well, why don't you wait until tomorrow morning?"

Liquid laughter. They must have spent the afternoon in the bar. "Listen to the silly man, Harry."

"Silly," said Harry.

"You tell him, Harry boy."

"Preposterous. Ridiculous."

"It's worse than it looks, Mr. Walton."

"Nonsense. Going in."

"Of course we're going in, lover. Tell Mr. Harry Lifeguard to go climb himself a tree."

"Or fly a kite. Good day for kites."

"Please, Mr. Walton, please! You aren't . . . well, you aren't quite the swimmer your wife is, you know."

"He can learn, can't he?"

"Can't condemn a man for trying, m'boy."

Can't condemn a man for murder, either?

The chunky brunette, warm and sympathetic. "Honestly . . . *some* people!"

"Stubborn. I'll keep my eye on him."

And what did you see? Ash-blond hair and tawny skin, wide olive eyes filled with secret sin?

Or a million and a quarter?

Nothing. Nothing but a bottomless ocean, swirling black . . .

"You *knew*, Mr. Sherwood. You knew that—"

"That he wasn't a strong swimmer?"

"And that the surf that afternoon—"

"I warned him."

"But your duty, Mr. Sherwood—"

"And argued with him."

"You had the authority, Mr. Sherwood—"

Authority? Yes sir, no sir. Is everything satisfactory, Mrs. Walton?

She screamed.

He wasn't in trouble yet. Too far out and over his depth, but no more danger than usual. Until that scream.

Water building, rising, toppling. . .

She screamed again.

Ride the wild spray.

"Mrs. WALTON WAS CLOSEST, SIR. BUT you see. . ."

"She couldn't reach him?"

"He broke away."

"And you had hold of him, once?"

"I couldn't hang on."

"But your training, Mr. Sherwood—"

"He was too much for me."

"And your experience, Mr. Sherwood—"

"Fear, Mr. Coroner. Blind, struggling fear."

Fear, all right, but not blind. Far from blind, near the end. A man can fight for his life, even if he can't swim.

She held him under, but he broke away.

Knife the downslope, ride all the way.

I was the one who showed him that bottomless pit, swirling black.

"And you made every attempt?"

"Until we were both exhausted."

"You didn't see him again?"

"Undertow, Mr. Coroner, undertow and rips. Until finally, the darkness. . ."

The darkness. They didn't find him until daybreak, half a mile down the beach.

Black the black of secret sin, black the shade of widow's weeds.

"Lora."

"You fool!"

"But. . ."

"They mustn't see us . . . together!"

"Listen. . ."

"You utter fool!"

"But when. . .?"

"San Francisco, two weeks from now."

"Where?"

"The St. Francis, you fool, get out of here!"

San Francisco, after two long weeks. . .

"Sorry, sir, you must be mistaken."

Mistaken? I had only killed her husband.

San Francisco, Honolulu. . .

"Mrs. Walton sailed aboard the *Lurline*, sir. Perhaps you can reach her in San Francisco?"

And perhaps you can reach her in hell.

Miami Beach, Acapulco. . .

"Gone for now, she may be back. You like to leave a message, Señor?"

Message, sure. Remind her I killed her husband.

Tahoe Lake and Ensenada. . .

"Care to leave your name, in case?"

"Thanks, I'll try again."

Try, try again.

"Mrs. Walton cannot be disturbed."

"Mrs. Walton says she doesn't know you."

"Mrs. Walton refuses to see you."

Mrs. Walton at Coronado.

The Coronado . . . and a lucky break.

"Hi-ya, Bill, you've come up in the world."

"Guy, you old buzzard, where've you been?"

"Here and there, everywhere. What's the gag with you?"

"Look at the door, can't you read?"

"Sure. Social director, but what does *that* mean?"

"Same old guff, with a raise in pay. You want a job?"

"Me? I'm looking for a wealthy widow."

"No kidding, my boy, you're the answer to a prayer."

"You mean you're broke—or did the lifeguard quit?"

"Nope. You remember that act we used to do?"

"With two empty bottles and your wife's best plate?"

"No . . . with Mack Sennet costumes and a high diving board."

"And a sprained back and a broken rib? No thanks, my friend, I'm getting old."

"You gotta, Guy!"

"Not for love, nor even for money. Those days are gone forever."

"But for your dear old pal?"

"My dear old pal can go jump himself. What's the pitch?"

"A water tournament, an aquatic revel."

"Good Lord."

"High diving, precision swimming,

water polo, and feats of daring. Courtesy of the guests themselves."

"Now I know you're crazy."

"Don't look at me, it's the manager's pet. We need Eleanor Holm and the Olympic team, but I'll settle for a Guy named Sherwood."

Pause for reflection, and a dawning idea. . .

"How about the customers? You got any talent?"

"Couple of college kids and one lush dame. She swims like a dream, but can't be bothered."

"It wouldn't be . . . a Mrs. Walton?"

"You know her?"

"Yeah, but I'd like to know her better."

"Cut it, Guy, this is serious. Another flop, and I'll be out on my neck."

"And you'd like to get this Mrs. Walton?"

"I'd rather have you."

"Well . . . give her a surfboard, the star attraction. She'd go for that, if you play it up."

"A board? But this is supposed to take place in the pool."

"All right, so the rest of it's in the pool. The guests can walk themselves around, can't they?"

"Well. . ."

"Make a deal. You get Mrs. Walton and I'll play Punchinello off your tower."

"What *is* this, anyway?"

"I told you I was chasing a wealthy widow."

"Mrs. Walton—a widow?"

"Sure. I killed her husband, but she ran out on me."

"You're crazy as hell, but. . ."

"It's a deal? Land Mrs. Walton and I'll help you out."

"Okay. I don't get your angle, but it's worth a try."

"And Bill . . . don't mention my name, or you'll scare her off."

So Mrs. Walton didn't hear of me, and Mrs. Walton didn't know me, and Mrs. Walton was not disturbed. In fact, Mrs. Walton laughed with all the rest.

Laughed when I tripped, climbing up the ladder. Laughed while I trembled on the end of the board, and laughed when I flopped like a bowl full of jelly. Fat, foolish clown, in a

wig and a costume. Laugh, clown, laugh.

BUT LARA, paddling out for her own demonstration. . .

She saw me then, and knew me then, when my head broke through the water.

"Guy!"

"Ready for the big one, Lora?"

The board. . .

"Ready for the last one, Lora?"

Her wrist. . .

"No, Guy . . . NO!"

The board, the wrist, the surge of power.

I had her in my arms at last.

The Deadly Husband

Do you know that husbands are more lethal to wives than are lovers? Prof. Edwin E. Sutherland of the University of Indiana, a well-known sociologist, bases this conclusion on a three-year study of New York homicide reports. He reports that, of 324 murdered women, 102 were done in by husbands, 49 by lovers, 37 by relatives, the rest by strangers. Careful, girls!

—*Park East, The Magazine of New York*

Mystery of the Missing Poker Game

POLICE raided a gambling casino where four men sat around a table apparently playing poker. The police sternly questioned each man. "You're playing cards in defiance of the law," they told the first man.

"Not me," he replied. "I just sat down to talk."

"You're playing cards in defiance of the law," they shouted at the second man.

"Me," he replied. "You got me all wrong. I'm a stranger here, myself."

"And you're playing cards too," they told the third man.

"Not me," he answered. "I'm just waiting for a bus."

The police then stared at the fourth man, holding a deck of cards in his hands. "Well, at least you're playing cards," they said.

"Me playing cards?" he repeated. "With whom?"

—*Advance*

WILL F. JENKINS

Will F. Jenkins has been translated into twelve languages, including Arabic and an African dialect, and he enjoys the distinction of having been pirated in most of them. Take that story he wrote last year about Peru in 1700; recently he heard the whole thing being broadcast from Cairo as true-to-life stuff—apparently current customs in Egypt approximating those of Peru two centuries ago. Or take the tales printed without permission in occupied Scandinavia during the late war; after the invaders were driven out, the successor publishers scrupulously sent checks in full payment, thereby making a gesture unheard of in the history of literary piracy.

Born in 1897, at seventeen he was working for Smart Set, at twenty-one began free-lancing. The only payroll he has been on since was that of the Army in two world wars. For many years a top favorite among readers of the big dicks, he is equally revered by consumers of pulp and science fiction—but under the pseudonym of Murray Leinster. He has just completed a collection titled *Great Stories of Science Fiction*, to be published by Random House under the Leinster name.

WALL OF

A MAN came down the valley, and Kent straightened up from the weeding of his tomato vines to watch him. He always watched, and there was always a faint constriction in his chest until an approaching figure was identified. There were times when he almost wondered whether he had chosen this place because of the sky above it, or because he could see anyone who came, a long way off.

But he knew it was the sky. There was a feeling of vastness, of a tremendous open space, here. The earth was like a springboard for a man's perceptions, so that always his eyes lifted to the blue with its tufts of white cloud above him. Kent could not doubt long that he had chosen this place because of its nearness to the sky. He was done with closed places forever—if God was good.

to live. But it takes a

sheriff to arrange it

FEAR

The man down the valley was on a horse which plodded along without haste, its head moving up and down. It was climbing. Kent could not see the man clearly, as yet. The constriction in his chest grew greater. His eyes seemed to blur.

Then they cleared suddenly. The man was the sheriff, Kent's old neighbor and good friend, who had no faintest suspicion that Kent had ever been behind walls that were designed to keep him captive.

The constricted feeling eased, but Kent had that momentary weakness of the knees which always followed it. He bent down again to his tomato vines.

The hoofs of the sheriff's horse clinked upon stone. It was nearer. The sheriff's hat showed above a near-by hill-crest. His body. The

horse heaved up into view and the sheriff waved his hand.

"Lo, Kent."

"Morning, Bob," said Kent. He straightened up and eased his back. "Climb down and visit a while."

"Can't do it today," said the sheriff. He frowned suddenly. "Look here, Kent. I came up 'specially to ask you. Do you know anybody name of Sawyer?"

Kent felt the constricted feeling in his chest again. He did not know anybody named Sawyer. But to be questioned about anything caused that horrible sensation.

"Why, no, Bob. Can't say that I do. Why?"

The sheriff poked at the tobacco in his pipe. He was disturbed.

"Two fellas were in town today askin' about you. Name of Sawyer, one of 'em said. Seemed to know you real well. He was short an' freckled an' redheaded, with—uh—a kinda shifty eye. I didn't take to him, Kent. Not a bit."

"Nope, I don't know him," Kent said carefully. "Can't you light and set?"

The sheriff shook his head.

"No. I got to get goin'. I thought I'd ask you about those fellas. I got to—uh—see if I can pick 'em up again."

"What's the matter?"

"Why—uh—that redheaded fella's face looked familiar, so I hunted around. An' sure enough, I found his picture."

"Well?"

"His real name," said the sheriff, poking at his pipe, "ain't Sawyer. He's been in a bunch of jails, it seems like, an' he's wanted again. Y'sure you can't even guess why he was askin' for you? Y'don't know him?"

"No, Bob. I don't." But Kent's whole chest was an agony.

"Funny," said the sheriff unhappily. "He sure seemed to know all about you, Kent. Even about you winnin' a school prize for your hand-writin', when y'were a kid. All right. I'll be gettin' along. I thought I'd ask you though. S'long."

He turned his horse and rode off. And Kent tried to keep on with the task of weeding his tomato plants. But he could not. He sat down weakly and looked out at the vast, empty space all about him.

His own valley ran nearly two miles between gradually deepening walls before it gave upon the larger one. And that other valley's width could be measured in other miles, and beyond it were peaks and mountains which stretched on past imagining.

There were no walls anywhere; no walls that could not be climbed; no walls with guards on top; no walls to limit the space to which his eyes could reach out and his body follow. He could pick up his hat and take the stick leaning against the door and

walk, and walk, and walk, and always he could go farther.

But there was this man who'd asked about him. Sawyer? Redheaded and freckled, with a shifty eye? That could only be Val Downy. He'd been Kent's cellmate for a while, and Kent had heard his boastings—which were not pleasant. He looked to be paroled. But Kent had come to know that he would go mad in prison, and he had made his escape by what—looking back—seemed almost maniacal cunning.

And Val Downy was here looking for him, and he was already wanted for crimes committed since his release, and his quest for Kent.

The sheriff and his horse passed out of sight. Away beyond his own valley Kent saw smoke rising lazily from the chimney of a house six miles away. He could look beyond. Ten. Twenty. More than that many miles. And there was not a single wall or bolt or bar to hold him back if he should choose to walk and walk and walk.

A long time later, Kent bent to his work. He labored all the rest of the afternoon. But he looked down his own valley more than once. And twice—familiar as the outlook was—his chest felt as if it were squeezed empty of breath. He thought he saw someone coming toward him, only to discover that what he had taken for heads were stones. But no one came.

Val Downy did not come until an hour after sunset.

It was almost dark. Kent ate his supper without a light, looking out of wide windows he had upon every

side of his little house. It was not possible for him to be at ease where he could not look for a long distance. He had looked upon walls and bolts and bars for much too long a time. He ate, and rested his eyes upon the dim outlines of the mountains against the horizon.

Then, quite suddenly, a voice said: "Stick 'em up, pal! You got company!"

Something pressed against the back of his neck. Something hard and cold. He froze. Hands felt over his body. Somebody took his revolver.

Kent said carefully: "Hello, Val. I heard you were down this way."

Val grunted. He came around in front of Kent and took a seat. He was short, and—Kent remembered, because it was too dark in the house to really see—Val was red-headed and his eyes were shifty. Kent remembered many things. His hands were tense on the table.

"Y'heard it, huh?" said Val. "Now how'd you hear that?"

"The sberiff," said Kent. "He came up to tell me that somebody'd been asking about me. You stuck in his mind, Val. He hunted up your picture. Now he's trying to find you again."

Val grinned. "All right, I'll duck." He waved his hand. "Meet a old pal o'mine. Pete Shims. We came down to see you. Social call. But also we got some business."

"I've quit," said Kent.

Val Downy laughed.

"Uh-huh. I say that too. Pete, this guy's the best penman in the whole country. He just didn't know how

to push over his stuff. He's on the lam from stir."

The other man grunted.

"Here's the trick," said Val unconcernedly. "Pete an' me, we need a good job of penwork. A letter an' a certified check. We brought the blanks an' some writing for you to look over."

"I'm never going to touch a pen again," said Kent.

Val Downy waved a hand toward Kent. "This guy," he said admiringly to his companion, "he pulls the slickest break that anybody ever pulled in the world! He's a bookkeeper in the office up in this can, see? An' he sees a pardon an' a order of release that's come through. An' what does he do but fix up some ink, somehow, an' take his pens, an' he writes himself a pardon. Nothing else! He hasn't even got a letterhead, so he writes one. He hasn't got a order-of-release blank, so he letters one with a pen. An' he phonies a envelope with a canceled stamp on it, an' he slips it in the incoming mail—an' he's out a week before anybody notices that that swell-looking pardon is phony!"

"I'm through!" said Kent. "I was a damned fool. I got in trouble for a girl who played me for a sucker. But I'm through!"

Val Downy looked at him and sighed. "But you're good, guy!" he protested.

"I'm not interested," said Kent. "I'm through!"

The man behind him said in a toneless voice, "Will I hop him, Val?" and Kent felt the hard gun muzzle

again against his neck. He sat still. Val Downy looked at him.

"Y'don't mean that."

"I do," said Kent curtly. "I'm finished."

"But look here," said Val indignantly. "You was in stir with me. You used to talk in your sleep about gettin' a prize for your handwritin' when y'were a kid in school. It pestered you. An' you used to talk about this place, namin' it. An' then you made a break, leavin' me behind, when you coulda made it two pardons just as easy as one. An' I didn't spill what I knew. I coulda told 'em what place you dreamed about, but I didn't. An' now I'm askin' you to do this writin' for us. You can do it. An' you'll get paid for it."

"I'm out of the business," rasped Kent.

"All I got to do," said Val Downy, "is write a letter tellin' somebody where you are, an' you go back in stir again. I coulda done that any time. I can do it now. Want me to? You better throw in with us, pal."

The feeling of constriction in Kent's chest grew horrible. His head swam in a despairing rage. Walls. Bolts. Bars. Walls. Stone corridors and stone floors and walls and bolts and barred doors and more walls. . .

"We got a honey of a trick," said Val complacently. "I blow into town an' hand over a letter of introduction to the big bank. I'm a private dick representin' a insurance company. We're makin' a deal to get back some stolen jewelry.

"So I hang around town a coupla days, an' then Pete turns up an' he's

the contact man, an' I shove my certified check into the bank cage an' get the cash, not marked, see, an' I pay it to Pete an' give the bank a package to ship on to the insurance company. An' then we blow. It's a honey. You write the letter an' the certified check. That's all."

Kent said, strangling because of the constriction in his chest and throat:

"I—I won't!"

The man behind Kent withdrew the gun from his neck. There was a sudden crashing blow on Kent's head.

"Guy," said Pete Shims' voice, "you ain't decidin' what you'll do or won't do. We're decidin' that!"

Blood trickled down Kent's neck. Val Downy said sturdily:

"Quit it, Pete! He's only gotta think a while. He knows that if he don't play with us, all we gotta do is drop a letter in the mail. He's goin' to do what we want. Hell! He's gottal!"

A chair scraped. Pete Shims sat down disgustedly. Kent bent his head in his hands. But the blow had done something to him. A deep, a horrible anger began to burn in him. This was not his doing, this talk of forgeries and crime. He had done wrong, to be sure. There had been a girl with a wheedling voice, and he had been insane enough—he must have been insane!—to feel that there was no service or crime he could deny her.

And he had done the things she wheedled him into, and the men she called her friends had undoubtedly prospered by Kent's doing those things. But he—well, he'd become

acquainted with the bars and locks and stone corridors and walls with guards upon them.

Now Val Downy proposed to blackmail him into a continuation of his folly. He was an escaped convict. . . .

There was a sudden clicking sound a long distance away. Kent knew what it was, of course. The click of a horse's hoof on stone. His eyes gleamed furively. But the other men heard it too. Their eyes met.

"Somebody comin'. We duck. We take him along."

A hand wormed into Kent's collar. It heaved upward. Val went swiftly to the door while Kent, half choked, yielded to the threat of strangulation and rose and moved ahead of Pete Shims.

"One man," said Val Downy, listening. "On a horse. I got a idea, Pete. Outsides! You keep him from squawkin'. We'll pull a good one!"

The three of them moved out into the vast, cool night as the horse came nearer. The starlight was bright, but not bright enough to reveal it or its rider.

Val Downy had a gun in his hand. He looked singularly alert and evil. Kent, knowing him, could see very clearly just what he would have planned. But a yell of warning from him would do the trick. Val or Pete Shims would kill him. He didn't care. But he wouldn't go back behind walls.

Shaking with rage, Kent filled his lungs to shout. He must plunge forward so Pete Shims' grasp on his

collar would be broken—so his yell would be complete. His muscles tightened—

He flung himself forward, his mouth jerking open for the cry of warning. He heard something like the bare beginning of a strangled squawk issue from his throat. Then it was as if a bar of red-hot iron crushed in his throat. He felt his body spinning and a horrible crashing blow. Then nothing.

A vast throbbing pain was his next sensation. A hard floor beneath him. Light. Voices. Val Downy's voice. It held a mocking satisfaction. As Kent stirred dazedly, Val's voice stopped.

"He's comin' to," he said in a different tone. "Souse him some more."

Cold water, in floods. The whole upper part of his body was wet. His head throbbed unbearably. Something insistently warm flowed down his cheek despite the water. He knew what it was.

He raised his head. Val Downy grinned cheerfully at him. Kent saw the sheriff, tied in a chair. There had been a fight. The sheriff looked stonily at Kent, who had been his friend.

"Back in town again, huh?" said Val. "Y'were kinda obstinate. But it's all fixed now. We been explainin' to y'friend the sheriff here just how we came to call on you. He didn't dream that you'd been in stir for forgery, an' that you wrote y'own pardon so you could get out before th' warden was tired of y'company. He knows now."

Kent made no answer.

"You been obstinate," said Val, "an' I aim to settle that up right now. We're goin' to leave him tied up—"

Kent said in a strange voice:

"There aren't three people a month come up here. He—he might die without ever being found!"

"Yeah?" Val seemed pleased. "If we leave you, we leave you tied up with him. D'you want to come with us or not?"

Kent's mouth was filled with a sticky substance that made speech almost impossible. He made sounds—and Val Downy suddenly said venomously:

"I don't trust you, Kent. Not a damn' bit. You sneaked out o' stir by y'self. Y'wanted to give us the runalong when we found you. Now we got you where you got to do like we say or it's too bad. Are you goin' to do our writin' for us?"

Kent swallowed. He said thickly: "If you'll let—"

"I'll let y'come," snarled Val, "when I'm sure of you. An' you're either goin' to prove you're finished foolin', or we're goin' to tie you right up along side him! An' if somebody does come along an' cut him loose, they'll send you right back in stir to stay there till you rot. See? You're goin' to prove you're with us."

Kent's mouth worked.

"Get me?" demanded Val. "I ain't tryin' to persuade you any longer. But you throw in with us for good—or you stay right here. An' if you want to know how to prove you're throwin' in with us permanently—" His voice rose stridently. "If y'want to know—why plug 'im. The sheriff!

I ain't goin' to an' Pete ain't. But either you plug 'im, or y' stay right here with him an' it's back to stir when they find you—if you're alive!"

Kent strangled. Val Downy watched him.

"It ain't phony," he warned. "He knows who we are. He knows I'm wanted. I ain't goin' to leave him loose while I make my getaway. An' I ain't goin' to take you with me unless you're in the game for keeps. Plug 'im or stay with 'im! You got y' choice. One way or the other. What you goin' to do?"

KENT made futile, ineffectual gestures. To stay with the sheriff would surely mean return to the place of walls and bars. But—the fact of murder aside—to go with Val Downy meant also to stay in many dingy hideouts with walls; to hide perpetually from the sun and stars in a fashion no less horrible. But—then again . . .

"Give me," said Kent thickly, "a gun."

Val Downy's head went on one side. He smirked wisely.

"Yeah! Give 'im a gun, Pete. But—get behind him! I'll get behind 'im too. An' we'll have our guns on 'im. Until he's finished the sheriff. An' watch 'im, Pete! Watch 'im till it's over. Then he'll be our little pal. He'll have to be!"

The sheriff eyed Kent stonily. His face hardened. He believed he was going to die. A little of the blood drained away from beneath his skin, but his eyes did not waver. He looked at Kent scornfully. His jaw

clamped. He wouldn't beg, anyway.

Kent poked the gun forward. It almost touched the sheriff's breast. He leaned toward the man who had been his friend.

"Bob," said Kent thickly, "Bob—"

The gun went off loudly.

Kent wavered. Then he turned slowly, the smoking weapon still in his hand.

"You asked for it," he said.

Then the gun suddenly roared itself empty. Val Downy's face wore an expression of extreme astonishment. Pete Shims' face twisted suddenly, as if in agony. The thing happened in the half of a second. Pete Shims' gun went off as if by a reflex contraction of his muscles. Kent's body jerked.

Then Val Downy's knees buckled and he sank suddenly to the floor. Pete Shims pitched forward.

Kent put his hand clumsily to his side. He turned about again.

"I'm not going back to stir, Bob," he said thickly. "I didn't kill you. I wouldn't. You saw me switch the gun aside so I didn't shoot you, close as it was. But I'm not going back to stir."

The sheriff swallowed.

"I'm going away from here," said Kent, speaking harshly. "If you'll promise to give me a start, I'll cut you loose. I can take your word. But I'm not going back in stir!"

"You, Kent," the sheriff said. "Was what they said about you the truth?"

"It's true enough," said Kent.

"I'll give you time," said the sheriff quietly. "Sure! Turn me loose. I promise you time to get away."

Kent cut him loose. The sheriff moved his muscles experimentally and bent over the two figures.

"Dead," he said. He indicated Val Downy. "This fella is wanted bad. This one I don't know anything about. But I'll send off a couple sets o' fingerprints, havin' buried 'em, an' report they shot it out with you an' me when they was cornered.

"It seems to me," he said, almost defensively, "like the fella that these two birds were huntin' for—that forger fella that escaped from jail—it looks to me like he's dead. I ain't breakin' my oath!" he added harshly. "You're my friend, an' that escaped prisoner they were talkin' about—he's dead. I got proof! Uh—Kent—will y' give me a set o' prints to send off an' prove he's dead by?"

Kent looked at him strangely. The sheriff grew vexed.

"Hell!" he said. "Look outa that window. Mountains. Valleys. All out-doors to look at. There ain't a wall in a hundred miles. In a thousand! Nobody to stop you from walkin' wherever you please! Dammit, Kent, you don't want to go away from here!"

Kent gulped.

"It's settled," said the sheriff severely. "An' if you ever mention this thing to me again, after we've got our story together, damned if I don't whale hell outa you! You're goin' to be a prominent citizen after this."

Then the sheriff swallowed. He caught one of Kent's hands and squeezed it convulsively. "Dammit, Kent! I felt that bullet goin' right through my gizzard! You got guts, Kent! You got 'em!"

WHO-DUN-IT

You



He'd faced better weapons than shotguns,

but in this affair Cupid used a knife

PHILIP WECK

can't RUN AWAY

Crime stories are in the habit of being blunt, tough, hard, rough, humorous, amusing—but rarely sensitive, nostalgic, as this encounter between homicide and G.I. Joe. Weck has the documentary technique down pat. The story broods well. The denouement, while reminiscent of lawyer Abe Lincoln's "almamoc case," has this merit of its own: boy not only meets girl, but also her hid sister. The tale also poses a piquing question: If murder comes, can love be far behind?

So you go home again. So you go back, after eight long years and two different wars on opposite sides of the world. After ducking a lot of lead and catching some of it. And what have you got?

Where is home? The filling-station they built when they tore down the tenement you used to live in? The cemetery where they buried your mother while you were in a far fox-hole? The church on the boulevard, where the girl married a bankroll?

Or that babe on the corner, waiting for the bus?

It looks like her. The same thick

brown hair. The same straight, graceful carriage; the same luscious, lovely figure. It couldn't be anybody else.

So you go up to her and say, "Hello." Then you remember—eight years have gone by. She's eight years heavier now, eight years older. She wouldn't have these young lines, that young smile. And she would have a ring on her finger, another man's ring.

You were just kidding yourself. All along you've been kidding yourself. When the babe on the corner says, "Hello, big boy; got a ciga-

rette!" you know how much you've kidded yourself. There isn't any home.

So you say, "Never use 'em," and you turn your back on her and head for Smoky's gin mill down the street. The same grubby-looking, dark, dirty gin mill.

Maybe Smoky's gin mill is home.

My feet were back on the ground soon as I walked into Smoky's.

It might have been eight years ago, before Pearl Harbor.

There was Smoky, sitting half asleep at the end of the bar. There was the milk bottle filled with pennies on the back-bar. The torn linoleum on the floor, the spittoons, the same big cockroaches crawling around.

And there, on the same wire-backed chairs, around the same rickety table, sat the same three. George, Maury and Brad.

Brad was the first to see me, and he jumped out of his chair like he'd just picked a winner out of the Racing Form. Fat-happy, slap-happy Brad, a little fatter, a little balder.

"Joe!" he cried. "Joey! Well, Joey, Joey! Good to see you, Joey! Have a drink, Joey! Look who's here, boys—it's Joey! Shake hands, Joey! Sit down, Joey!"

That left George and Maury.

George, with a pretzel in one hand, a glass of beer in the other; he put the pretzel in his mouth and got to his feet and shook hands and sprayed pretzel crumbs as he said, "Hello, Joe. How are you, kid?"

And Maury.

Maury, adding up the bets they'd

taken in. Maury heavier and older, not so fine-looking, not so rakish and smooth. Drinking whiskey now.

Maury, who looked at me from under his eyebrows and said, "So the hero's back."

Maury, just as nasty as ever.

Brad sat me down and bought me a drink and gave me a cigar and slapped me on the back and George went on eating pretzels and grinning at me and Maury went on counting his money.

Brad said, "Joey, you sure gave it to them gooks in Korea! Joey, it's good to see you! Back in the same old ball park, eh, Joey? Like the old days. The good old days, Joey!"

"Yeah," said George through another pretzel.

"Tell you what, Joey! We'll get the gang together! We'll have a blowout, Joey! Right here, like in the old days. The same guys and the same babes. Sally and Mike and Mildred and Ed and Joyce and me, and you and—"

Then he stopped. Then he sat there with his slap-happy fish-mouth wide open.

And Maury said, "Tell me when it's going to be so I can stay home."

For a minute nobody spoke. Brad with his mouth still open and George with his little eyes darting from me to Maury.

Maury said, "Maybe I ought to stay home every night with my shotgun, now the hero's back."

I could feel my cheeks burning and my fists were clenched and the white hot anger was climbing into my brain and blinding it.

Not because he was talking about me. Because he meant Lucy.

Lucy, the keenest little bundle in the block. The sharpest, neatest, trimmest babe in the bunch. And decent. Clean and decent, if the world was ever decent. Like the white sheets in a base hospital after they'd found you bloody and grimy in the dirty, muddy rice paddies of Taegu.

Lucy, the kid who'd lived next door. Who'd held my hand in high school. Who'd worn my graduation pin and who'd pressed her growing body into mine and kissed me full and warm and loose on the lips when I'd enlisted three days after Pearl Harbor. Who'd written every day until we had hit North Africa, and then every week, and then after a whole month. And then not at all, because she'd gone up those church steps with Maury, the boy with the gold in his pockets.

Yeah, that was the set-up.

I might have known. Home? You can't go home. There isn't any home. There isn't any tenement where you climbed three flights of stairs every night after school. There isn't any vacant lot where you learned how to hit a baseball, because they're building in that lot now. There isn't any gang in Smoky's, any get-together with George and Maury and Brad, because Maury had dangled his gambler's gold in front of a lonesome girl.

So I got up from that table and I finished my whiskey—after eight years you don't waste whiskey—and I turned to leave.

And Maury said, "Maybe you're

another one thinks I was kidding about that shotgun, hero."

I faced him square. The anger was flashing across my eyes and I said, "A shotgun is a lousy weapon, Maury. A lot better boys than you have aimed a lot better guns at me, and I'm still walking around."

And I left. Alone, the way I'd gone in.

All alone. Looking for a home that wasn't there. A home that had existed only in my mind for eight long years.

A stranger, I walked down strange streets, past strange buildings and strange people. And I was glad I didn't want to know this city any more. I didn't want to know these people.

There was Lucy, a fine girl, a fine woman now, sitting alone, all alone, night after night. And there was Maury, a fine boy once, sitting in a cheap, dingy tavern, counting race bets and drinking whiskey and talking about a shotgun.

It was messy, nasty. It wasn't home. Home was a foxhole or a base hospital or a prison camp. Or a dream. It wasn't this.

So I went back to the cheap hotel where I'd registered, and I packed my bag and I signed out and I hiked over to the bus station; it wasn't far. I bought a ticket, a ticket to anywhere, and then, because I had more than an hour to wait, I went out and walked some more.

I just picked my feet up and let them fall. I followed my feet. Right back where I'd come from.

Without realizing it, I was only a

hundred yards from Smoky's when I saw them. Two of them this time. Standing on the corner. One of them young, with thick, brown hair, a straight, graceful carriage, a luscious, lovely figure. And the other one younger, with thicker, browner hair, a straighter, more graceful carriage, a figure even lovelier.

Sure. Lucy. And when I saw her, I knew why I'd made that mistake before. The other one, the younger one, the cuter one, was Tess, the kid sister. Pigtails and a skipping-rope and jacks when I went off to war, but a long skirt and a tight sweater and a warm, flashing smile now.

I didn't want to see Lucy. I didn't want to talk to her. But what can you do? You can't run away from them; you can't turn your back and run. So I waited on the corner and they came up to me, right up to me.

"Got a cigarette, big boy?" Tess asked, and she was smiling.

I said, "Sure. I got a cigarette." I gave her one. But I wasn't smiling, and Lucy wasn't smiling either.

"You know," Tess said, "I think Joe tried to pick me up a while ago."

I don't think Lucy heard her. She was just a noise, a wind, a background. Lucy was looking at me and I was looking at Lucy.

"All right," Tess said. "I'll go in that drug store over there and I'll have a coke. I'll give you just that much time—as long as it takes to drink a coke."

She went off and Lucy moved in, like I'd pulled a string. She stepped up close to me and she pressed against me and put her arms around

my neck and kissed me. A long kiss, warm and long and fierce. She was heavier, maybe stockier than she used to be, but she was still Lucy.

With both hands, I pushed her away.

"I was wrong, Joe," she said. "I was so wrong."

I said, "Yeah."

"It's too late now, isn't it, Joe?"

I said, "Yeah."

But this was Lucy. The old Lucy. Never-give-up Lucy. "Does it have to be too late, Joe?"

I said, "Yeah, it has to be."

"It's all my fault, isn't it, Joe?" she said.

Cokes are six cents now and they're short, and here was Tess again.

"Look," she said, "Maury's going to be in pretty soon. You'd better get along."

Lucy slipped her hand under my arm. "Walk me home again, Joe, like you used to. Please."

You can't run away from them. You can't turn down a reasonable request. I walked her home again. To a different home, with a man waiting in it, maybe, and a shotgun under his arm, maybe, peering out the window and watching for you.

Don't get me wrong. I wasn't afraid of Maury. I was afraid of Lucy. Afraid of what had happened to her and what hadn't happened to her. How she'd changed and how she hadn't changed at all.

Walking along, with Tess maybe ten yards in front, I said, "What is it? A prison? Maury gets home, you got to be there? Maury goes out,

maybe you can sneak out a little? A prison, Lucy?"

"It's worse than a prison, Joe. He knows I made a mistake. He knows it worse than I do. He yells and hollers when a magazine salesman comes to the door. When the milkman stops, he's going to shoot, he says. Maybe he will, Joe. He's like a crazy man. Maybe some day he'll kill the milkman, or maybe some day he'll kill me."

We walked down the street, Tess in front, then Lucy and me.

"What am I going to do, Joe?" she said. "Wait for him to kill me?"

We turned a corner and walked some more.

"Why does it have to be too late, Joe?" she asked.

It's about a hundred yards between street lights. We walked past the first one from the corner. Past the building they were putting up in the lot where we used to play baseball.

"Maybe we could fix it, Joe," she said.

We passed the second street light and the little candy store where I used to spend my pennies on the way to school.

"Don't you care for me any more, Joe?"

We kept right on walking. Walking, silent, with the only sound a truck rumbling somewhere in the distance. We passed the third street light and there was Tess, waiting in the shadows in front of a big, gloomy, dark house.

"You can take me home as soon as Lucy gets inside," she said. "Can't you, Joe?"

Sure. Walk 'em all home. Listen to their sad stories. But stay outside. Stay there on the sidewalk and let them go in alone. Don't ever forget that, brother.

Lucy said, "Goodnight, Joe. It is too late, isn't it?"

I said, "So long, Lucy."

She went up on the front porch and took her key out of a handbag and Tess and I stood on the sidewalk, watching and waiting.

Tess said, "Is that a bus ticket sticking out of your pocket, Joe?"

Yeah, it was a bus ticket.

She said, "I like you, Joe. I always liked you, even when you tied my pigtails in a knot. It's good to see you again. But maybe you'd better use that bus ticket."

"Sure, Tess," I said. "Sure. Have a cigarette?"

But she didn't get to take this one. Because Lucy called out from the front porch, "Joe!"

I turned around.

"The door's stuck, Joe. I can't get it open."

So I went up there on that porch, Maury's porch, beside the woman, Maury's woman, and I tried to open the door.

It wasn't stuck, exactly. Something was blocking the way, something inside. Not wood or metal or even heavy furniture. That would have been hard and unyielding. This was softer; it moved a little each time I pushed. It was down near the bottom of the door, some of it catching under the door, giving and then holding fast.

But even a body, Maury's body,

won't hold a door shut when you put your weight against it.

I'd shoved it way back against the wall when we finally got in, shoved the body and half-rolled it over and smeared the blood along the floor and made a nice mess out of everything.

You could smell that warm blood—a sickening, sweet, stifling smell. You could see it there on your shoe where you'd stepped in it. You could almost feel it gushing out, hot and heavy, splashing over your hands and dripping onto the floor.

I touched his forehead and slapped his cheeks and fumbled around for his pulse. But it wasn't any use. Somebody had done Maury in. Somebody had done for him with a knife.

Maury. The man Lucy had married. She was standing against the opposite wall, close to it, peering over her shoulder, her eyes big and wide and her face pale.

I got to my feet again, up off the floor beside the body, and I said, "Is this what you meant, Lucy? Is this what you wanted to arrange?"

She didn't answer me with her voice. She didn't answer me at all, because I couldn't read what her eyes were saying when they moved from that cold, dead body on the floor to my face and then back to the body.

So I stepped over beside her and I said, "Maybe it was all arranged before you met me. Is that it, Lucy?"

"Oh, Joe!" she said. She grabbed the lapels of my coat and she stuck her face in between them and she shuddered. She didn't cry or sob; she

shuddered, shaking and trembling. "Joe," she whispered, "I didn't do it! Oh, Joe, I didn't! I couldn't!"

I believed her, of course. Or did I?

What was the difference—I put my arms around her anyway and held her close, trying to stop those shakes.

Right there, with her husband hardly cold on the floor, I put my arms around her and held her tight.

That was the way we were when Brad walked in.

Maury on the floor, his eyes open and his throat open, too. And Lucy and I in a clinch, less than ten feet away. Brad, and behind him, taking it all in over his shoulder, Tess, the kid sister.

Brad looking at the body, then looking at us. Then tiptoeing over to the body, carefully, very carefully, so he wouldn't step in the blood. Then tiptoeing back.

"Joey!" he said. "Joey! You poor kid! Joey, what a jam you're in!"

I was in a jam?

Me?

"You better take off, Joey!" he said.

Lucy pushed herself away from me and she said, "What are you talking about, Brad? He didn't do it! Joe didn't kill him!"

Shrugging his shoulders. That was Brad. Shrugging his shoulders. He didn't know. He wouldn't know. Brad, the bystander. Ask him, Mr. Policeman. Doesn't know a thing.

"That George," he said. "And Smoky. Them two. They can't keep their mouths shut, Joey; you know they can't keep shut. Everybody in

town knows you and Maury had a rhubarb. Everybody in town knows you and Lucy were standing on the corner so close you shouldn't be. And you're going to call the cops now, Joey? You're going to tell them you just stumbled over the body, Joey? After what everybody knows?"

You could see what he meant.

Lucy grabbed my lapels again. "Oh, Joe!" The pity was in her eyes, the fright and fear. "What did I do to you, Joe?"

"You better take off, Joey," Brad said. "You better grab yourself some miles. Right now, Joey."

Lucy said, "Don't go, Joe!"

But I pushed her aside. I stepped around her and Tess and Brad, out onto the porch, and I gulped in great big breaths of the night air. The smoke-filled, sooty, dusty night air of the city, that didn't taste or smell like warm blood.

"We'll tell them something, Joey. Don't worry, Joey, we'll give them a story," Brad said. "You just hunt yourself up some distance."

I walked by them, down the steps, with the breeze blowing in my face and the hall light shining on my back.

"Don't you worry, Joey!" Brad called after me.

I went on, down the sidewalk. Past the first street light. Past the scaffolding and the brick wall where home plate used to be. Past the candy store where I'd spent my sweaty pennies. Out of the city. Away from home. Away from the dream I wouldn't dream any more.

Behind me, I heard the tinkle of footsteps, of little feet pushing high heeled shoes along the pavement, and the voice saying, "Joe! Oh, Joe!"

It was Tess, the kid sister.

"Joe," she said, "where are you going?"

I said, "Away."

She caught up to me and walked along at my side, swinging her arms, her little face serious, dead serious. Past the corner where Lucy and I'd stood not so long before. It's a free sidewalk; if they want to walk beside you, can you stop them?

"Where's away, Joe?" she said.

Yeah, where was away? I had a bus ticket in my pocket. But the cops would be after me, and the cops don't quit easy. And then the Army, if I didn't report back from my furlough. The Army doesn't quit easy, either.

I had a bus ticket to nowhere.

Tess said, "You run away, they'll be sure you did it, Joe."

Yeah, they'd be sure. I go away and they're sure. I hang around and they're sure.

"They'll be looking for you, Joe. Every cop in the country. Every cop you ever see. You can't hide all your life, Joe."

No, you can't hide all your life.

So I stopped. I faced Tess. I looked into her eyes; they were all clouded up with worry.

I said, "Okay, kid. I'll go back. All the way back."

It was a long way, too. We didn't say a word; we just walked, side by side, the way we'd come, watching a police car shoot past us with its

siren crying, hearing somebody shout across the street, listening to all the usual noises of the night and the extra noises of that particular evening, the noises of murder.

We walked past two corners, and the candy store, and the building they were putting up, and we came to Maury's home. Not dark, the way it had been before, but blazing with lights now, from every room. Not standing silent and quiet, back from the sidewalk, but with three police cars pulled up in front and an ambulance and men walking up and down and neighbors standing on their porches and rubbering.

Right up on that porch we walked and a cop stopped us and Tess said, "We're relatives," and he stepped aside.

Right past the spot in the hall where Maury had laid all crumpled up and rolled over and bloody and where there was only a chalk outline now. Right into the living room, where we could see Brad and a big, husky man with gray hair and a black suit and sharp, brown eyes and cop all over his face.

Right into that room we went, in time to hear Brad say, "Sure, I seen him, Lieutenant. He come out of the house here and he walked up to the corner and met the dame and he kissed her, right there on the street, Lieutenant. I seen him. She was waiting for him, Lieutenant."

Gray-hair said, "Like it was a put-up job, eh?"

We stood there in the doorway, the two of us, Tess and I, listening, while Brad answered, "I only know what

I seen, Lieutenant. And what I heard when them two was quarrelin' over the dame."

The lights were on in that room, all of them—an overhead light in the center and a couple of lamps on the side. But it was like a spotlight to me, a spot shining on one person, Brad, and him standing out all alone there in the center of the room. I couldn't see anything but him, not the furniture, not Gray-hair, not Tess beside me. Just Brad.

I was tired, bone-tired, waiting for Brad to finish his piece and for Gray-hair to put the cuffs on me. Tired of looking for a home they'd torn down years ago. Tired of running. Tired of trying to get out of the mess they'd fixed up for me.

Beside me, Tess said, "He's lying! He's lying, Lieutenant!"

Like a man who'd been shot in the shoulder, Brad spun around. He stared at us and his mouth hung open, down to his chest. His mouth hung open.

Maybe Gray-hair knew we were there all the time. Maybe he just wasn't the kind to be surprised. He said, "And who are you people?"

"I'm the guy you're looking for, Lieutenant," I said. "It don't matter who she is; I'm the one you're after."

"How do you know who I'm after?"

I said, "I'm the guy who quarreled with Maury tonight. The guy who was kissing his wife on the street-corner, like a high-school kid."

Tess said, "It isn't true, Lieutenant! How could he see all that? He's lying!"

She meant Brad, of course, and Gray-hair said, "Yeah, boy, how come you saw it all? Where were you standing?"

I told him. "Right in front of Smoky's. The tavern. You can see the corner from there and you can see this house through the vacant lot where we used to play ball when we were kids. Remember, Brad?"

"That's right!" Brad said. "That's where I saw you, Joey. You saw me, too, huh, kid?"

"Remember when we used to play baseball there, Brad?" I asked him. "Remember the athletic club we had and how you used to hold out the club's dough for yourself? How much money were you holding out on Maury, Brad?"

He said, "What?"

"How much were you holding out, Brad? How much did he catch you with? How much did you kill him for?"

"Joey, what are you talkin' about? Joey, who killed him, boy?"

"You did, Brad. You didn't see me coming out of this house, Brad. You didn't see anybody through that old ballfield. Because they're putting up a building there now, Brad, and nobody can see through a brick wall."

Then he jumped at me.

The knife was in his hand, where he'd flicked it out of his cuff.

I grabbed his wrist just before it could hit me in the stomach.

I had to put all my strength into holding that wrist, and he clipped me on the jaw with his left elbow.

I brought my knee up and the knife slashed along my pants leg. My

wind was cut off; the lights were dim. I swung my left and caught him under the heart and then, somehow, I wriggled loose and clipped him on the jaw and he sagged back.

Then Gray-hair was on him with the handcuffs. And it was all over.

And when they picked up George, he saw how the cards were and he remembered Maury and Brad quarreling about the money Brad had been holding out.

He remembered Brad being so happy to see me. Brad, who hadn't been my particular friend—who hadn't been anybody's particular friend—falling all over me because it stopped the quarrel.

They let us go, Tess and me, about one o'clock. We took Lucy to Tess's apartment and put her to sleep with some pills the police doctor had given us and then we stood on the porch, Tess and I.

"She'll be all right," Tess said. "She'll get over it. She hated him, really, but she didn't kill him."

I said, "Yeah."

"And you'll be around," Tess said. "I think she still likes you, Joe."

I said, "Yeah."

"And you still—" Then she stopped. She leaned up against a post of the porch and she said, "Got a cigarette for me, Joe?"

"Sure," I said. "I got a cigarette for you. I got a whole pack for you, Tess. I got a whole carton."

But she took only one from the pack I held out. She looked right into my eyes when she took it, and I looked right into her eyes.

And then I knew that I was home.

DON MARDICK

Crime as a fine art is being sorely neglected these days, as much by its practitioners as by its authors. Newspaper embroidery fails to hide the prosaic texture of most current transgressions—usually of the hit-and-run variety, lacking the finesse, forethought or flair characterizing superior craftsmanship. The same faults mar today's output of crime stories, whether appearing in the pulps, slicks or our neighbors, the pocket-sizers. The blame? Mass production, we guess.

All the more refreshing, then, to come on a crime yarn as deft as this one. Hunted and hunter pursue their jobs with true artistry—as does the author, a Philadelphia schoolteacher who, to disguise his penchant for shockers, writes under several pseudonyms.

WHEN HE made out the car topping the distant hill, Conroy went into swift but deliberate action. He stowed the binoculars far back in the china closet, crushed out the cigarette idling in his fingers, and moved energetically through the hall. The radio still muttered along about the prison break, and the phrase "... thousand dollars in cash" floated after him.

That would be a rehash of the payroll robbery, he decided. In the gleaming kitchen the deep-freeze lid swung up at his touch, revealed tiered rows of containers to the very

not a LEG

top, swung gently down again. He examined the packages thawing on the table, touched the coffee pot on the electric stove, peered through the little round window of the dishwasher at the foaming suds.

He shrugged and shook his head, as if to say: *Best I can do—let's hope it'll be good enough.* Going back through the hall, he stopped to glance into the bedroom on the right and the bathroom on the left, and to close both doors. With the hall door also closed behind him, Conroy drew up the wheelchair near the oblong table, and made a last scrutiny of the living room.

Well, he was as ready as he'd ever be, he figured. Carefully he adjusted the rough blanket around the bulge the automatic made near his right leg, and rubbed off the slight sweating in the palms of his hands. Then he got out pipe and matches, and prepared to light up.

brace of coppers. Mix 'em up with some

guns and you've got a recipe for frozen dough!

TO STAND ON

He waited for a second knock and called "Come in," settling back in the chair. He was putting the flaming match to the tobacco when a man stepped in, closed the door, and leaned against it. The visitor kept his hands in his overcoat pockets, and talked slow and soft.

"Anybody go by here the last couple hours?"

Conroy waved the match into smoke. "Depends on who you're looking for. And why."

He watched the visitor's eyes, shrouded under a slouch hat, as they methodically catalogued the room. His glance rested on Conroy's close-cropped hair and sallow face under dark glasses, on his concealing blanket. He inspected the polished wheelchair and the smooth bright linoleum on the floor, his nostrils widening just a little as he caught the faint oily odor of the heater purring in the far corner.

Then he moved his head in a slow circle, taking in the rest of it: the radio-phonograph-television set now crooning a commercial, the closed hall door, the desk with the battered Sears, Roebuck catalogue on it, the dumbbells and wall-exercisers lined up beside him. He examined the window glowing with mountain sunset, and finished up with Conroy's long, powerful arms and broad chest.

The visitor's voice stayed casual. "You been listening to the news broadcasts?"

"Sure," answered Conroy. "Why?"

A board creaked warningly in the hall. The visitor's hands came out of the overcoat pockets, a revolver in one of them, and with heavy, unhurried tread he stepped across the room. Conroy smiled, in the knowing manner of a spectator watching performers in a play.

He shouted suddenly, loud enough to be heard through the door. "Get

out!" Then he reached in under the blanket for the automatic. The visitor stretched for the knob, but the door smashed in on him, knocking away his weapon and spinning him over against the desk and down on his knees. Another man jumped through the open door, the gun in his hand weaving slightly like the head of a snake.

Awkwardly, the man on the floor dove at him, and the two locked in struggle. The gun exploded, dropped to the floor. A thrashing foot caromed it across the room. Conroy, sniffing at the odor of gunpowder and smiling in the wheel chair, spoke without raising his voice.

"Break it up."

They pulled apart. Conroy cheerfully waved the automatic from one man to the other.

"Reminds me of visitor's day," he said. "Only they didn't allow guns." He studied the flushed, panting newcomer, a smaller and younger man. "Now, explain yourselves."

The second visitor glared at the radio, just then emitting low, yearning moans from a blues singer. He ran one hand through a shock of curly hair, tucked a loose-hanging muffler back under his topcoat collar, and exploded into angry speech.

"What goes on? I heard him holler. The door was closed. You took long enough in here. I was sure you had him."

The first man seemed to understand the implied criticism in his tone, without at all resenting it. He kept his gaze on Conroy in the wheel chair, and said, "We both thought

just about the same thing, I guess."

The other man hunted around the floor until he found where the two guns lay. "If you'd moved a little faster, it wouldn't've happened." He snapped back to Conroy, standing like a coiled spring ready to unwind at the first chance. "Your name Conroy?"

"What if it is?"

"We're looking for your brother Jack. He here?"

"Nope," said Conroy.

"Was he here?"

"Nope." Conroy's replies were prompt and cheerful.

"Then what's the idea of hollering out like that? And pulling the gun?"

Conroy laughed. "You guys think because I live in a wheel chair you can parade through here like the Gestapo or something? I'll yell out and I'll pull a gun anytime I feel like it. It's *my* house, and you can't make free with it. Now, who the heck are you?"

"I represent Acme Insurance. The name is Prentice." He made it sound like the presentation of a celebrity. A slight nod served to introduce his companion. "Davidson, River City police force. Your brother Jack's busted out of prison."

"I know. Heard it on the radio. But how do I know you're really cops?"

Prentice looked disgusted. "How do you—? Say, you crazy? I got identification right here—"

"Keep your hands down," Conroy broke in. "I ain't taking chances. I don't see too well with these glasses, and I ain't letting you paw around

in your pockets, either, for maybe another gun."

Frantically Prentice turned to Davidson. "What're you standing there like a hunk of rock for? Can't you see it's a stall? Jack Conroy's been here and gone. There's traces all around the place. *He's* just trying to hold us here. Giving his brother time to bolt." He took a step forward.

"Don't either of you move," warned Conroy. Haven't fired a gun for some time, but don't suppose I'd miss at this range."

Unmoved, Davidson had been watching him all the while, from under his slouch hat, through slitted eyes that looked yellow in the fading light. Without turning his head, he spoke to Prentice. "What traces?"

"Yeah," Conroy chimed in. "Cops're supposed to be keen at clues and stuff. What traces?"

Words poured out of Prentice in an excited stream of pride in himself and contempt for the others. "There's a big deep-freeze back there in the kitchen. About a dozen packages of the frozen stuff out on the table. And some canned goods. Just like if Jack was packing up a grubstake.

"Coffee pot on the stove's still warm. Dishwasher's working. I stopped it and found *two* of everything, like he'd been eating with Jack. Bathroom's all wet from a shower, towel's damp, floor's wet. And looka there!" He pointed dramatically at the oblong table beside Conroy, but neither Davidson nor Conroy followed his finger. "That ash tray's full of *cigarette* ashes. *He* smokes a pipe!"

As if to corroborate him, Conroy calmly took the pipe from his mouth, and frowned judiciously at the curling smoke-wreaths.

"You sound like a cop at that. Only a dumb one. Can't I make coffee? Can't I thaw out frozen food for my own supper? Can't I take a shower or throw a clothes-hanger on the bed? Can't I smoke cigarettes *and* a pipe? Heck, can't I have visitors who smoke cigarettes and have coffee in my kitchen?"

Davidson stayed silent. Prentice shouted scornfully. "Then what's all the palaver about? And the gun? You're obstructing justice and you know it. You put up that automatic and stop this tom-foolishness!"

He tried to take another forward step, but Conroy's hand moved slightly over and upward, and he stopped in his tracks.

Conroy said mildly, "I'm in my rights. You fellows remember to bring along a search warrant?"

Prentice turned fiercely again on Davidson. "How come *you're* taking it so calm and quiet? Don't feel too interested in meeting up with Jack after all, eh? Well, *I* am! *I* ain't too old or too close to retiring. *My* record ain't about closed and *I* ain't made *my* pile. I aim to get Jack Conroy and get him *first*. We got to take this guy and—"

Davidson talked to Conroy right through Prentice's tirade. "Traces could be fakes."

"Fakes?" The unbelieving echo came from Prentice.

Davidson nodded slowly, talking to Conroy as if Prentice weren't

there. "That window faces west, and it's open country between here and the hilltop. You could've seen us coming. With coffee already heating and the shower running, you had plenty of time to turn them off, lay out the foods, get your pipe ready to light up just as I came in so I'd be sure to notice it. The ash trays you could've been filling up a long time in advance."

He uttered each sentence with care, like a man walking up stairs and testing every step. "You knew there were two of us. You yelled because you knew we'd think the other man was Jack Conroy. Pulling the gun is just another part of the act. We're *supposed* to think you want to hold us here. We're *supposed* to try to get away fast after Jack."

Conroy kept his arm steady on the rest, his blanketed legs immobile. But he knew he was puffing more deeply and sweat was again moistening his palms. He said, "Why the heck would I do all that?"

Davidson talked on, ignoring the question, ignoring the way Prentice blinked his eyes and dropped his lower jaw in surprise. "Prentice didn't mention clothes-hangers, but you did. So you knew they were out on the bed. You'd have removed traces like that if you were really protecting your brother. But you just left them around, every last clue and suggestion you'd had a visitor, and pretended to be lying about it."

Conroy's eyes glittered with challenge, but he only said, "So?"

"So there are several possibilities. You could be expecting your brother,

and trying to get rid of us by making us think he's already been here."

Conroy leaned back, relaxed, rubbing his free hand gently along the smooth, polished armrest, registering surprise.

"Jack? He wouldn't come here. He knows the insurance people've been watching me ever since the payroll robbery three years ago. Hoping Jack left the loot with me, maybe. But he didn't." His voice became confidential, friendly. "I'll tell you. Jack and me, we never did get along. This'd be the last place he'd ever come to after breaking out of stir. No, sir. No fatted calf waiting for Jack around here!"

"Trying to put one over on us, eh?" It was Prentice speaking. "I thought there was something flukey around here. That means we stay right here and wait for him."

Conroy said, "You'll have a long wait, boys. A *mighty* long wait. Jack's *never* gonna come here. I told you that already."

Davidson moved one thick arm in a slow, embracing movement. "All this modernizing. Ramps front and back, dishwasher, freezer, radio-television, exercisers, heater. Runs into money. Jack broke out of stir right after these injuries of yours. Heard you were making a splash since you left the hospital, and came up here to see if you'd crossed him up."

Conroy pityingly clucked his tongue. "More pipe-dreams, copper. Fellow drove the car that hit me, he's paying for all this. All I know is, the bank notified me a man deposited fifty grand in my name. Con-

science money, see? He doesn't want a hit-and-run rap, but he does want to go to heaven. So he works it so I can live in clover." Conroy looked down at the automatic, shrugged, dropped it into his lap. "Cops or not, I told you fellows to get out of my house and I mean it. You can do your waiting for Jack outside."

Prentice scurried across the room to grab at the fallen guns, and tossed one to Davidson, who caught it and held it loosely.

"Then again," said Davidson in the same matter-of-fact tone, "Jack might still be here, hiding some place, and that's why you tried to get rid of us."

Conroy, leaning abruptly forward, waved his pipe at Prentice. "He rummaged through my place. Where you think Jack could be hiding?"

"He ain't in this house," Prentice said angrily, as though in self-defence. "I looked." He eyed both the other men now, in turn, the squat figure with the shadowed face and the erect body and pale face in the wheel chair, like a spectator at a duel.

Davidson said, "Or, you might be Jack Conroy yourself."

Prentice cried, "What?"

Conroy relaxed again with a twisted smile. "You're talking through your hat. You got pictures of Jack, don't you? And a description?"

The persistent voice probed on. "You could fit. Shaved head, prison-pallor, dark glasses on your eyes, sitting in a chair with half of you under a blanket."

"Holy cow!" cried Prentice. "Then

where's—? That's it! You could've disposed of a cripple easy. Anywhere out there, dead and planted, maybe. You could've figured his chair'd be a good hideout." He strode over to the wheel chair. "I know one way to find out."

Conroy offered no resistance. "You're gonna eat crow, copper. I can't move below my waist."

Prentice's hand yanked away the blanket, flipping the automatic in a wide arc through the air and onto the smooth floor near Davidson's legs.

Conroy's legs were thin and withered. For a long moment, the only sound was the radio pleading for an early visit to an advertising dentist. Conroy, watching Davidson, noticed no sign of disappointment in the broad, blank face.

"You cops are too suspicious."

Conroy carefully replaced the blanket, smoothing away its wrinkles with his palms. "My head was shaved in the hospital. That's where I got my complexion and my glasses. This wheel chair I got from Sears, Roebuck. I ain't my brother Jack, and I ain't disposed of or planted." His voice took on edge. "I ain't an easy mark, either. I got a trainer coming in here twice a week. I know a little judo. I do plenty exercising. I can make it tough for anybody gets inside my reach." He pounded his clenched fists once on the arm of the chair, decisively. "Make up your minds, boys. If Jack's been here and gone, you lost twenty minutes, and the sun's down. If he's coming, you can go camp outside all night or all year, for all I care."

Prentice turned again to Davidson. "Quite an egg you laid there," he said bitterly. "Now we're right back where we started from."

Conroy nodded in matter-of-fact agreement. "And wasted lots of time. You'll need floodlights and bloodhounds to find Jack now." He emptied his pipe, clacking it against the ash tray in a kind of final punctuation. "Mind if I get my supper now? Kinda late. Sorry I can't invite you to join me. Just show yourselves out."

His touch on the guide-wheels sent his chair rolling smoothly forward toward the hall door. Prentice moved aside for him, but Davidson didn't budge.

Conroy pressed the hand-brake, stopping the chair inches from Davidson's feet. "Well?" Conroy challenged him.

With disgusted finality, Prentice spoke over Conroy's head. "Looks like a wash-out. I guess we'll make tracks."

He put up his gun and swung around to the front door. Davidson stayed where he was, the revolver dangling at his side, Conroy waiting in the wheel chair for him to move. The radio was issuing organ-music now, deep and mournful. Slowly, stubbornly, Davidson shook his head.

He said, "Or—one other angle. I think I'll take a look around myself."

Before Conroy could head him off, Prentice himself objected. "Oh, come on. Jack Conroy's hot-footed it outa here long ago, even if he was hiding when we came. Besides, he wasn't here. I looked."

Davidson repeated, without emphasis, "I think I'll look myself. Keep your eyes open."

He turned his back on them and moved slowly into the hall.

Prentice, with a what's-the-use look on his face, gloomily eyed the darkening window, then went over to the front door to press the light-switch. Amber light flooded the room, but left the hall still in shadow. Prentice moved back to where Conroy sat motionless.

Down the hall, Davidson's broad, squat figure seemed to stoop to the floor a moment, then it disappeared into the kitchen. Conroy tried to listen for noises from the kitchen. Sad organ sounds from the radio made an irritating background for his thoughts. He tried to swallow normally, to forget his sweating palms.

Behind him, Prentice muttered, "These old dicks, you can't teach them a thing. Takes a year for something to sink in. Why the heck they teamed *me* up with *him*!"

Davidson loomed in the hall and came toward them. Conroy backed his wheel chair, and Prentice took a step back, to give Davidson space to re-enter the living room. Davidson's expression hadn't changed, and he still had the revolver hanging from one hand.

Without speaking, he went leisurely to the telephone stand, and seated himself solidly. He shifted the gun to his left hand, reaching out with his right for the receiver. Conroy moved with sudden speed.

He twirled one wheel, jamming

the back of his chair hard into Prentice's stomach. Prentice doubled over with a grunt and Conroy's hands heaved him over on top of him in a writhing heap, tightening around him in a crushing grip that pinned Prentice in his lap.

Prentice went limp, a living shield across Conroy's body, and Conroy yanked the gun out of Prentice's holster. He looked at Davidson, who hadn't moved except to drop his right hand back into his coat pocket. He still sat at the telephone table, the gun in his left hand hanging toward the floor, his face unchanged, his eyes boring into Conroy's.

Davidson said, "What do you expect to gain by that?"

"Drop the gun," Conroy panted.

Davidson's fingers opened and the weapon clattered to the floor. Conroy released the unconscious Prentice with a slight shove, the limp body sliding out along the floor near Davidson's feet. Conroy backed up a little, leaning forward with the gun in his fist thrust out ahead of him.

"Never expected this, did you?" Conroy said. "I got plenty muscle *above* the waist, see? And some in my head too." He chuckled. "A *cripple* like me getting the drop on two able-bodied coppers—twice!"

"Not to mention your brother Jack," said Davidson. "That was smart work, but you overplayed it. You faked the traces, you bragged about your strength, you told us what would happen to Jack if he ever came here, you were too darn cocky and satisfied with yourself. Only thing bothered you was when

I said you were Jack taking your own place. That showed I was warm, even if I did have things *bollixed* up.

"Seemed like only one place for Jack to hide, and only one way for him to hide there. Especially when the deep-freeze was full up and *extra* packages on the table. Pretty smart, putting him down the freezer, all covered over with food and stuff. Everybody'd think Jack was on the lam and nobody'd wonder about his being missing. You could bury or burn him later on. Only now you got two more of us to dispose of."

Conroy smiled crookedly. "You came in the front door. You heard him on the other side of the door. He came in the back way, he heard you. You took each other for Jack Conroy, you both tried to open the door at the same time, you killed each other. It really happened that way, almost. Remember?"

Davidson sighed. "Take my advice, and let me bring you in peaceable. Right now you got one body you can maybe justify. Way you're doing, you'll have *three* you can't possibly justify."

Conroy hesitated, a little flame of doubt licking at his self-confidence. "Justify?"

"Look at the commonwealth's case. You hid a corpse, lied, resisted arrest. Makes it look premeditated. You heard Jack escaped, on the radio. You expected him. You were spending the payroll money. You wanted to keep on spending it. You planned to kill Jack when he got here if you couldn't stall him off."

Conroy considered him in silence. Davidson crossed his legs, buried both hands comfortably in his pockets.

"Which way do your finger-marks go on Jack's throat where you choked him? From the front, back, or upside down like this boy here? And was he dead *before* you put him in the cooler, or only unconscious and froze to death? Autopsy shows lots of angles you don't figure."

Conroy waited, gripping the gun tightly in his sweating palm. Davidson went on, in the same reasonable manner.

"Now, think what a good lawyer could make of it in court. Jury'll have only *your* word for what happened between you and Jack. Defenseless invalid, already in a wheel chair prison for life, hit-and-run accident, vicious criminal for a brother, wanted by the law. You got brains, guts, you defend yourself. You got panicky, tried to cover up. You throw yourself on the mercy of the court, jury lets you off." He paused. "Want to toss me that gun?"

Conroy snarled "No!" and ran his chair up close, with Prentice's body lying between them. "Getting talkative all of a sudden ain't you? But I'm not buying any of it. I can take care of myself, good as any man with two legs, and I don't beg from nobody!"

Davidson sighed again. His right hand came up out of his pocket with the automatic already spitting fire. Conroy's gun exploded once, then fell from his shattered, bleeding hand. Stupefied, he stared through

gunsmoke at a spreading crimson spot on Davidson's left cheek.

Davidson's slow, unchanged voice boomed maddeningly in Conroy's ears. "You forgot about your automatic," said Davidson. "I picked it up in the hall."

It was silent again, except for the radio. Outside, darkness had come. Prentice stirred slightly, uttered a soft groan.

"You should have done it my way," said Davidson. "We had our car radio tuned to the same station you got. Just as we came over the hill, they finished up the news broadcast. You said you heard it, but you lied. That's what tipped me off first. You *didn't* hear it, otherwise you'd've handled the whole thing different."

Conroy found himself licking his lips. "What broadcast?" he asked hoarsely.

"Your brother Jack slugged a guard on the way out. Fellow died. Announcer mentioned a reward. Ten thousand in cash for Jack, dead or alive. Insurance company added another five, hoping to find the payroll loot. That's what got this kid here so excited. You were probably so busy setting up a false trail, you missed it. Too bad. Once you had Jack in your hands, even as a corpse, you could've turned him in and claimed the reward. Fifteen grand for you, and still no proof you had the payroll money, and you're in the clear. This way—!"

He shook his head, and reached again for the phone. "You young fellows just don't take your time to see things or listen to them." He be-

gun to dial as Prentice sat up jerkily, rubbing his neck. "Or think them through, Jim?" into the mouthpiece: "This is Davidson, up at Walt Conroy's cottage. . . . Yeah, he's here. Send up the ambulance. One corpse, two injuries. . . No, no trouble."

Conroy watched Prentice scramble

up off the floor, reach automatically to straighten out his muffler and topcoat, under Davidson's sober gaze.

"I'd've called you sooner," Davidson was saying. "Only this insurance man they sent along with me, he wasted lots of time and slowed me up considerable."

Honest Crime Dep't

AN official in the Non-Selfgoverning Territories wished to test the honesty of his native houseboy. He left a 10-franc note purposely about the house. The boy brought it to him.

"You may keep it as a token of your honesty," said the official.

This test was repeated at irregular intervals. The boy never failed to deliver the planted money, and was always told, "You may keep it as a token of your honesty." One day the official unwittingly left on the table his wallet containing several thousand franc notes. It disappeared and the servant was very mum.

"Haven't you found my wallet?"

"Yes, I did," said the boy quite calmly.

"Well, where is it?"

"I kept it as a token of my honesty."

—Betty Stones in *U.N. World*

For the Record

IN THE Spring, 1951, issue of *SUSPENSE*, the story entitled "Jeannie with the Light Brown Cure" by Alexander Samalman carried this erroneous footnote: "Copyright 1942, Thrilling Wonder Stories." The correct copyright note should have read: "Originally published under the title, 'Medical Nose' in the February, 1942, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, and copyright 1941 by Better Publications, Inc." We hope this makes everyone happy.

—The Editors

SUSPENSE



When the menu is murder, some
eat crow—some eat buzzard

TERROR *in the sun*

TALMAGE POWELL

If the mission of the story-teller is to evoke a mood, then here is fiction doubly fulfilled—awakening emotions both of horror and tenderness. A push from fate . . . an evil chance . . . a stumble among quicksands . . . these, we are reminded, can overwhelm a man; or they can bring out such steel as lived in Cobb and Lonnie.

The author, who in 1949 was nominated for an Edgar Allan Poe award in mystery fiction, at the age of thirty-one has published nearly three hundred short stories and novelettes. And yet, speaking of moods, he finds the time daily to indulge his own. They call for (1) taking naps or (2) playing the clarinet.

Cobb and Lonnie found the body in a palmetto thicker. As they came upon it, an obscene vulture reared its head, its beak dripping.

"Buzzards!" Lon said. Cobb tried to keep the pale, thin boy back, but Lon darted forward and flailed a pine-knot as the awkward bird wheeled up, wings creaking and slapping in the muggy silence. With a guttural cry of rage, Lon flung up his arm. The pine-knot slapped the bird's head sharply and it toppled heavily almost at the feet of the panting boy.

Cobb had hardly been aware of Lon's killing the buzzard. He couldn't drag his eyes from the body the killers had left to the vultures on the bank of the sluggish Everglades creek. The killers had stripped the body of every means of identification, but the filthy birds had left enough on the fine young frame of bones to show Cobb it was his eldest son, Brad.

Cobb felt the sickness churning up from the crannies of his soul. He was numb with a feeling inside like his guts had been ripped open. Yet

this was what he had known he would find from the moment he and Lonnie had come upon Slavey's big car, its front wheels mired in the bottomless sludge at the side of the deep-rutted sand road.

He forced himself to stand quietly in the sweltering heat, his twelve-gauge shotgun on the crook of his arm. Agony burned through him like fever. He had known something was wrong when Brad had come running home, not frightened, but tight-lipped and determined. He had pleaded with Brad, but Brad wouldn't talk much about it, even when the fat man, Ed Slavey, and his wizened companion, Skins Regger, had showed up at the farm. Trouble, bad trouble, had followed Brad home, and now the boy lay dead—left like an animal carcass to the sun and the vultures.

Cobb brought his agonized eyes upward. The sky was metallic, cloudless. Out there across the muck flats the saw grass stretched interminably, broken by black mud creeks. Out there, somewhere, were the men who had done this to his son. The skin glazed across his cheeks.

Cobb felt Lon shivering and sobbing silently at his side. Lon knows too, Cobb told himself. He knows the full pain of sadness. But the poor dull child is lucky, he'll have forgotten before we're home, and smiling he'll hunt a butterfly to chase.

Cobb worked, sweating and silent, digging a grave as deeply as he could in the soggy muck. Once he looked up through blurred eyes and saw Lonnie dragging the dead vulture

toward the grave. Not a butterfly to chase this time. Something new for Lonnie. A wave of revulsion crept hot through Cobb. "Throw the thing away, Lon," he said.

Lon went on standing with the buzzard's scaly legs in his fist. "It's filthy, son," Cobb said. Lonnie frowned and dropping the bird, came away from it, although his eyes coveted it across his shoulder.

Cobb returned the earth over Brad's ravaged body. His stumbling prayer was for the vengeance of Heaven upon the men who had left his son to desecration. Lonnie stood with head bowed across the black mound from Cobb until the prayer ended. But when Cobb looked up, Lonnie had run back to the dead buzzard and was raptly poking at it.

Gathering up his things, Cobb ordered the boy away. But Lonnie held to the bird as though bewitched by it. He was on his knees beside it when Cobb called to him to start home across the swamp.

Lon looked up, his eyes bright. He motioned to Cobb. "Tracks!" Lon cried.

Cobb moved. He stared at the place where Lon pointed. If there were footprints they were too faint for Cobb's strained eyes. Cobb was a slow, thick-shouldered farmer, and this was his first encounter with violence. Yes, here could be the answer to the gall-bitter wish stirring inside him. He'd give his life to come on those two killers.

He looked at the sunbaked sand that told him nothing. But the excitement in Lon's pale eyes communi-

cated itself to him and he felt his blood running fast.

"Follow them, Lon!"

Lon ran about in the grass and palmettos as Cobb watched him. The boy moved off north along the creek and, the sense of urgency rising over the grief in him, Cobb followed.

He kept his eyes fixed on the unchanging land ahead. Heat waves swam up, cranes screamed in the shallows and Lon's honey shoulders kept bobbing up in the brown sawgrass.

Soon Cobb saw that Lon had forgotten. The boy was playing with a stick in the creek. Clutching his gun against his side, Cobb said gently, "The tracks, Lonnie."

Lonnie grinned and bobbed his head. Cobb had always been obliged to let the boy wander, days at a time, in the hot, silent stretches of the 'glades. Lonnie wandered despite all Cobb could do about it. Fishing, picking wild flowers, visiting the Seminoles. You might as well try to keep some young animal home without a cage, and Cobb was too kind to think of a cage for his son. Lonnie was happy, and that's what counted in Cobb's book. Neighbors and Indians knew the boy and watched out for him, and he always came home about the time Cobb was exhausted searching for him; for Lonnie always eventually remembered where he lived, what he was about.

Cobb figured it was about four o'clock in the afternoon when they came to Cal Drudger's muck

farm. This was higher ground. Gaunt slash pines reared scraggly tufts against the merciless sky. When they reached a mangrove thicket, Lon came running back to Cobb.

"They hid in the mangroves."

"Good boy, Lonnie." Cobb's eyes narrowed; he felt his throat constrict. They're up there, he told himself, they're in Drudger's farmhouse.

Slipping his arm about his son's shoulders, Cobb could feel the boniness under the sweaty shirt. "I'm right proud of you, boy. Will you go home now? Straight home?"

"Sure mike," Lonnie said, pleased at his father's approbation.

Cobb watched Lonnie hurry off across the flats. It was a long way, and there'd be no one to remind Lonnie. He might not be home for days, but at least out there in the land Lonnie knew so well, the boy was safer than he would be here.

In a crouch, Cobb moved out of the shielding mangroves. He pushed the safety off his heavy shotgun as he ran across the deep black furrows of plowed ground toward Drudger's shack.

Outside the window, Cobb held his breath and listened.

He heard Slavirey's thick, bloated voice from the dining table. "I told you to bring me more to eat."

Cobb remembered the way the man had impressed him. Slavirey's hunger was psychopathic, voracious, far beyond the needs even of his great hulk. He had to be eating, eating all the time.

Pulling himself up to window level, Cobb peered into the gray

room. Slavirey was like a mound of grease at the table, with Vera Drudger gaunt, defiant and frightened before him. Regger, thin and deadly, the fat man's sidekick, had a .38 laid on the table. He was watching Cal Drudger, who was like a compressed spring on a straight chair against the wall.

Cobb watched Slavirey lumber up from the table and slap Vera across the face, staggering her back. "Don't you crackers know how to be polite to guests?"

Cal Drudger moaned and leaped toward Slavirey. Regger shoved out a foot that caught Drudger in the belly.

Drudger doubled up and reeled back, hard. Cobb felt his heart hammering. He thrust the round mouths of the gun into the room ahead of him.

Big Ed Slavirey saw the gun first. Cobb watched the gluttonous man's greasy face twist. "Regger!" Slavirey said.

Regger snapped the .38 around as Cobb came through the window.

Without even aiming, Cobb pressed off the first trigger. The big double-barrel bloomed fire. Regger screamed. The .38 bumped on the floor, and everybody in the room stared at the ragged mess Regger now wore at the end of his right sleeve.

Thick-shouldered, his blue shirt sweated out, Cobb Mixon sat in the open window, with the twelve-gauge loose in his grasp.

He watched Slavirey's thick lips move, m u m b l i n g unintelligible words.

"Would you take the fat man's gun?" Cobb said evenly to Cal Drudger. But it was Drudger's wife who acted. She took the automatic from Slavirey's shoulder-holster, careful not to get between Slavirey and Cobb's waiting shotgun.

She scooped up Regger's .38 and brought both guns to Cobb.

"How could you know we needed you so, Mr. Mixon?" Vera Drudger breathed. "You've always been a good neighbor—but I reckon now you've saved our lives."

"Lon's been tracking them," Cobb replied, watching the killers.

Regger was moaning and sobbing as he tried to bind the shotgun wound that had left his hand a bloody, stringy mass.

"I reckon," Cobb said, "you'd better tell me about the killing of my boy Brad if you ever hope to save that hand."

Regger's eyes shot up to Cobb.

"I mean it," Cobb said, "I can pretty well guess what happened to Brad. He wasn't a talky boy, but there was a lot on his mind when he came home. He wasn't a bad 'un, either, not bad enough to warrant your killing him."

"You got us wrong," Regger said, his face, his whole body, shaking.

"I got you dead to rights," Cobb corrected. "Brad left with you. You killed him because you're a pair of big city syndicate killers. I know he was mixed up with you and that he crossed you. That means a killing in your book, don't it?"

"You can't prove a thing," Slavirey whispered.

"I'll prove plenty," Cobb said. "When you gunned my boy, you figured a quick run back to your kind of civilization. But the marshland trapped you, wrecked your car, left you afoot. And Regger here is going to tell me about it, ain't you, Regger?"

Regger rolled his head back and forth on his shoulders. Slaveiry made a motion toward him. "You keep your two-bits worth out of this," Cobb said, showing the fat man the bore of the shotgun.

Then Cobb waited, cold and implacable. The silence in the shack echoed the wheezing of Regger's breathing. "That's your life messing up Drudger's floor," Cobb reminded, almost gently. "You'd better admit I've guessed this whole thing right."

"It wasn't my idea," Regger's voice was a muffled scream. "Slaveiry bossed it all."

"All right," Cobb said. "Miz Drudger, get some iodine and we'll see if we can keep him from dying of blood poisoning or bleeding to death."

Slaveiry exuded his thick-lidded hate for Regger as Cal Drudger's wife fetched iodine. Regger screamed as the raw medicine hit the wound. The woman whitened but bandaged the wound stolidly.

"I'm beholden to you," Cobb told her. "Now I'll take these two along."

He prodded the pair ahead of him across Drudger's clearing. In twenty minutes Regger was staggering. The fat man mumbled a hope that Regger would die. Cobb's prodding gun kept Regger going.

Sweat poured out of the fat man like molten lard. He pulled off his felt hat and carried it in his hand for a while. Then he hurled it aside in the palmettos. He kept dragging his arm across his steaming face, his breathing loud and rasping.

Regger fell twice before they crossed the bare yard to Cobb's empty smokehouse. The second time, Cobb had to threaten to shoot off the little man's left hand to get him to his feet at all.

The corrugated tin roof of the smokehouse reflected the last rays of the afternoon sun. Cobb called for Lonnie, but there was no answer. The boy had forgotten. He was probably playing some game of his own in the marshes.

Cobb held open the rough, thick door of the smokehouse. He made them stand just outside it and empty their pockets. Knives, brass knuckles, wallets, even their sodden handkerchiefs were dropped to the sand.

"All right," Cobb told them. "Inside."

Slaveiry waddled in and Cobb shoved Regger after him.

Regger stumbled on the floor, and lay panting against the greasy boards.

Cobb looked at the two men peering at him from the gloom of the breathless room, and the memory returned of how they'd stripped Brad's body and left him to the vultures.

Across the yard, he recognized Lonnie's ambling shuffle. Cobb smiled with relief, and then his face blanched.

Lon was dragging the vulture

he'd killed beside Brad's grave.

As he came near, the sandy-haired boy dropped his eyes, abashed at the condemnation in his father's face. Clearly, the boy wanted his father's approval above anything else in the world, but he couldn't resist the horrible fascination of this bird.

Cobb kept his voice gentle. "I want you to go for the sheriff, Lonnie. Will you do that for me?"

"Sure mike!" Eagerly, Lonnie bobbed his head. He dropped the buzzard at his father's feet and raced bent-shouldered across the yard. But Cobb saw the boy had already slowed before he reached the line of trees down by the road.

Slavirey wiped away the sweat and looked about the narrow, dark oven of a room. "How long will it take him?" he whined.

Cobb looked up at him. "Lon's memory ain't good," Cobb replied. "It might take a day if he don't forget. It might take a week—"

"A week!" Regger wailed from the floor.

"Lon's a good boy, and he'll get there," Cobb said. "Anyhow, I can't

go. He's all I got to send. You men might dig out, with me gone."

In his face was invitation for either of them to try to dig out while he sat there, waiting with his shotgun.

Regger slumped against the floor and wept. Finally, he lifted his head. His voice was a horrified whisper.

"Water?" he muttered. "Who'll give us water?"

"I'll get you water."

Slavirey's face was a melting moon of fat. His gluttonous mouth worked. He dragged a thick, wet tongue across his mouth.

"And food," he wheedled. "I take a lot of food."

Cobb's hand tightened on the door. "I dunno about food," he replied. His eyes moved to the tattered vulture in the sand. A sudden change worked across his face, turning it to ice. He picked up the vulture, and with revulsion strong in his features, he backhanded it into the smokehouse.

His gaze lifted, and his shoulders went back. "I'll see if I can fetch you a little salt," he said.

And Cobb slammed the solid smokehouse door.

Short Plot for a Very Short Story

IN ANXIETY, a dove spoke to her spouse: "Husband! Our death-hour is now come! Below there stands a hunter with his bow and sharp arrows; above us hovers a falcon."

So it was indeed, but a snake bit the hunter, whose arrow pierced the falcon, and both forthwith departed to Yama's dwelling.

Wonderful is the ordinance of Fate!

—Hindu parable.

*This messenger of destiny sacri-
ficed not only strangers, but himself*

CHARLES H. GESNER

how can
you
be

reading this?

Here is what might be called "practical" fantasy—not the usual excursion into dreams or imagined lands but an ordered story whose only hoax lies in its own inexorable logic. Read it and weep—or at any rate, laugh. A refreshingly original effort by an author who, as a result of certain fantastic activities while slugging across Europe with Patton, holds a D.S.C.

I SNIFFED the bouquet of the cigar the salesman handed me and murmured: "It's pungent."

If I hadn't said those two words, if I'd said just anything else, the world would have continued being familiar and *known*.

Instead . . .

His reaction was astonishing.

He vaulted over the counter, seized me by the lapels, poked his nose to within an inch of mine and in a deadly voice ground out a question that seemed to accuse me of crimes beyond imagination.

"What — did — you — say?" he snarled.

I was so flabbergasted by the salesman's volcanic reaction that for a moment I was helpless. Then returning composure brought anger with it. I knocked down his hands.

"Whatever you thought I said. I didn't," I growled.

His cigar-clerk aspect seemed to slip a little. He stepped back and looked at me too quickly. I had the impression there were eyes behind his eyes, a face behind his face. Then

he was again very New York or Chicago or Los Angeles. If I had owned a cigar store I would have hired him myself. Perfect cigar salesman. Not a jarring note.

"Sorry, sir. I thought you said something you couldn't possibly know."

But I was so thoroughly irked that I foolishly ribbed the fellow, thereby strangely and terribly changing several lives.

"But I do know, my good cigar-salesperson. I do know."

"You do?" The question was incredulous.

"Certainly." My tone was mocking now. "I referred to the smell of this cigar. It's pungent. Pungent. Meaning sharply aromatic."

"And you say you know?" he asked quietly, his fingers at his bow tie.

"Sure. Why shouldn't I? Don't you?" I demanded.

"Naturally. But I don't think you do, really. You might, though, and so I'm calling on you tonight." He tilted his head to one side, gazing at me speculatively.

I shrugged.

"And I will find you," he added. The way he said it indicated that it should have meant something to me. But it didn't. Not then.

"Mister, you are so far off your rocker that you wobble," I told him. I turned and left the store.

There was dinner and a movie that night with Martha. The show something entirely believable about boy meets girl, meets trouble, meets kiss. But Martha, sitting beside

me holding my hand, did not seem entirely believable. Beloved Martha. Small, blonde, beautiful and beautifully in love with me. Lost Martha. Forever lost because of two idiotic words in a cigar store.

He was sitting in my reading chair when I got home.

"You left your door unlocked," he said, annoying his bow-tie.

"Talk fast, mister. In a few seconds you won't have any teeth to talk with," I told him.

"Then you *don't know* after all, do you?" he said.

A small glow-worm of wonderment lit up in my guts.

"All I know is that there is something about you slightly three-dollar bill. Confederate money, that is."

"Steven Crane, I'm really sorry," he replied. "I can see it's all a mistake. I thought you said *expunger* in the store. I jumped to the conclusion you had either managed an impossible recognition or else were from—" He broke off thoughtfully. "Well, it wasn't in the book but it is now. And I'm here. I have *called on you*. It's too late for you to do anything. Look at me!"

That's a challenge nobody can resist. Try it sometime. I looked into his eyes and lost—existence. As I looked, the very standard salesman face melted, rapidly at first, then slowly jelled into something so *different* that no human mind could maintain an image of it and remain sane. Something from Otherwhere. It sat there regarding me coldly.

"I am an Expunger, Steven. In a few moments you will be one too,"

remarked this horror from—where?

I began to feel faint.

When I came to it was morning and I was on the floor feeling sick all over and with that sense of diminishing terror invariably accompanying the first few seconds after a nightmare.

I decided the whole thing was—had to be—a nightmare. And that I was sick enough to go see Dr. Bassett. My body felt as though every joint and muscle had been yanked and twisted out of shape. I was all ache and my head swam.

I arose and struggled through a shower and the rest of the day's preliminaries. An hour later I walked into Room 693 of the Brand Building and asked the nurse if Dr. Bassett was in and could see me.

"Sorry, sir," she said, smiling toothsome, "we have no Dr. Bassett here."

"Impossible! Why, I've known Dr. Bassett for five years and he's always been here."

"And I," she retorted, "have worked in this office for seven years and for seven years it's been Dr. Phillips." She was regarding me curiously.

I back-watered.

"Well, then, could I see Dr. Phillips? I ache all over. Flu, I guess."

"Dr. Phillips will be out of town for several days attending a convention. Besides, he's a dentist. There are several physicians down the hall," she told me.

That was too much for me so I left while I could still be polite. I was almost certain it had said *Arthur*

Bassett, M.D., on the door as I entered.

Now it said: *J. P. Phillips, D.D.S.*

Going down in the elevator I decided to be my own doctor. On the way home I bought a fifth of strong medicine. Five doses later I felt better physically but even more baffled mentally.

I called three different people I was sure had been Dr. Bassett's patients at one time or other. The first was a clerk in my brokerage office. He had been a pneumonia patient.

"Jerry, do you know where Dr. Bassett's new offices are?" I asked.

"Bassett? I don't know any Dr. Bassett," he said.

"You sure?"

"Positive," he declared.

"Well, then—who treated you when you had pneumonia last year?"

"I've never been sick a day in my life, Mr. Crane," said Jerry.

I hung up and whistled a long soft note.

It was the same with old Mrs. Prentiss and Harvey Williams. They had simply never heard of any Dr. Bassett. She had never had a broken arm treated anywhere and he had never had appendicitis.

I looked in the phone book. No Dr. Bassett. There was not and there had never been a Dr. Bassett on the staff at Mercy Hospital, they said. I thought of his receipted bills and dug through my files to get them. No bills.

Then I called Dr. Phillips' office and got the nurse on the phone.

"Remember me? I'm the fellow who came into your office this morn-

ing and asked for Dr. Bassett."

"Yes, I remember. How are you feeling?"

"Better. Since a consultation with Dr. Calvert."

"I'm glad to hear that. What can I do for you?"

"Please think carefully," I said, "and then answer this question for me. You saw me this morning, but did you ever see me before anywhere or at any time or do I remind you of anybody you have ever seen?"

"The answer is 'no' on both counts," she answered.

"You're dead sure?"

"Dead sure. I wouldn't make a mistake like that."

I said, "It's not your fault, I guess, but thanks for nothing."

I remembered that Dr. Bassett had told me he had been born and raised in town and so I phoned the Bureau of Vital Statistics. They had no record of his birth, life or death. Before I gave up I tried to locate his wife. No such person.

So all right. There had never been a Dr. Bassett and I was either crazy or that damned cigar salesman had hypnotized me.

The phone rang and I answered.

"Is it still pungent?" asked the salesman. He seemed to be friendly enough.

"I was just thinking about you," I gritted.

"I thought you might be," he said, cheerfully. "And I thought possibly you might be thinking of coming down to the store to see me."

"I was."

"Don't."

"Why?" I asked.

"Listen carefully. If you value your existence, such as it will be from now on, and if you have any desire to escape punishment beyond human understanding—which will still be yours for a while yet—do not visit. Now or in the future. Never. Don't—ever—come—to—see—me."

"Why not? I don't get it."

"You will. And I'm relaying your orders to you. From time to time you will receive the name of some person. You will call on this person. You'll find it impossible not to. Ultimately certain" tremendous advantages will accrue to you. Meanwhile, arrange a livelihood, if necessary, that does not require you to call on people deliberately. Personally I find a tobacco store exactly suitable to my assignment."

He hung up.

"What is all this about *calling* on people?" I asked myself.

I knew the answer wasn't in the bottle, but I searched.

Next day I learned it was impossible for me to call upon a client. Making an appointment on the telephone was simple enough but after I tried to call on two of them, I gave it up.

They both just vanished from knowledge as had Dr. Bassett. Disappeared without a trace.

I decided to call upon Dr. Phillips and his nurse. As I walked in I took pains to note that it still said *J. P. Phillips, D.D.S.*, on the door.

I asked the nurse, a girl I had never seen before, if Dr. Phillips didn't just happen to be in,

"There's no one here by that name. It's Dr. Winkler."

"Thanks. Thanks for plenty," I said, and walked out.

On the door was a sign—not new—saying, "Dr. Samuel S. Winkler, Diagnostician."

That night I got a special delivery letter. It said:

"An oversight on my part. Refrain until further notice from calling on anyone unless so ordered. Especially ignore persons you may consider necessary to the future. I know you will not want to call on persons you may like or love. Cigars?"

My first "assignment" came in the afternoon mail.

"The existence of Jason S. Henderson, 2311 South Mulberry Street, this city, is dangerous. Call on him. Cigarettes?"

Jason S. Henderson was listed in the telephone book. Mrs. Henderson answered my ring. Mr. Henderson was at work. He would be home that evening. Yes, it would be all right to telephone him at work. He was the manager.

He answered the phone promptly. Yes, he lived at 2311 South Mulberry Street. He would be at home that evening and it would be all right to call if the matter was really important.

Along about dark I took a cab to South Mulberry Street and punched the doorbell button at twenty-three-eleven. A man came to the door, masticating, as though he had been interrupted at his evening meal.

"Good evening," I greeted him. "Is Mr. Jason S. Henderson here?"

"Mmmbody b'at name nis house," he mumbled through his cud.

"You positive?" I asked.

He swallowed and said: "Lived here nine years myself. No Henderson here. Name's Potter."

I decided to get tough.

"Listen, Potter," I snapped. "I'm on to this business, see? Now, by damn, you tell me where you came from—just now!"

"From the dining room. What's the matter'th you, anyway?"

"Before that," I shouted. "Just before that, where did you come from?"

"Bathroom. Say, what're you? Drunk or Galluper?"

I gave it up, walked back to the taxi and told the cabby to stop and wait for me in front of the nearest drugstore on the way back uptown.

Sure enough, Jason S. Henderson was no longer listed in the telephone book.

Later that evening the phone rang in the apartment—the apartment that was to have been redecorated and made into a home for me and Martha. Mr. and Mrs. Steven Carter.

"Matches?" inquired the voice.

"Information," I replied.

"Still puzzled?"

"Who wouldn't be?" I asked.

"Few indeed," came the cheerful response.

"What's happening to me?" I demanded.

He laughed.

"Everything that's going to happen to you has already happened, except further orientation. It's the people you call on, or, rather, attempt

to call on, who have things happen to them."

"Where do they go?" I asked.

"At the precise moment you consummate your attempt, you expunge them. At that second they cease to exist, and what's more, from that instant onward throughout time, they never did exist. All you have to do is announce your intent or ask for them by name and—fffft."

"But," I asked, "what if somebody becomes suspicious?"

"How can they? The missing people never did exist once you make your call."

He went on to explain that in the remote possibility that curiosity was aroused, all that was necessary was to call upon the curious one and the danger was eliminated.

"And that," I stated, "is why you cannot have me call upon you."

"Precisely."

"What if I did?"

"I would cease to exist and, therefore, you would cease to be an Expunger, but would instantly be snatched off to a very nether place where you would endlessly suffer horrors so alien to you that your brain pattern, now, would permit you to sense them only dimly."

"How about the time you called on me?" I asked.

"About once in a hundred years or so an Expunger is permitted to make a recruitment call. All other calls result in erasure. If you got another deliberate personal call from me now, it would mean erasure for you.

You see, because I thought you might know too much, I had to call on you. However, I was permitted to recruit you. There was no other choice."

"But what's all this expunging about?" I asked.

"Surgery. Removal from the present of unpredicted trends and random effects dangerous to the planned goals of the future."

"But I don't care about being in on it. I'd like to have my recruitment canceled in a hurry."

"Impossible. You'd have to be called upon."

"Oh," I said.

"Anyway, go take a look at yourself in a mirror. Put your eyes a little bit out of focus and stare for several moments." He hung up.

I did just that. After a few moments my face melted as his had done and another monster from Otherwhere leered out at me from the mirror. God!

I have not written to Martha. That might be fatal—for her.

What I have done is this: I registered this morning at a midtown hotel under my own name. I will sleep there tonight. In the morning I will get up and go out of the hotel. I will go to my apartment and shave off my moustache and put on colored glasses.

Then I will return to the hotel. I will walk up to the desk clerk and will say: "I am calling on Mr. Steven Crane!"

Who knows? Maybe it will work!

Six were trapped in the frozen

Arctic. How many would survive?

THE SEVENTH MAN

SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-ROUCH

Revered as a stylist and a critic of style, Sir Arthur also had extraordinary strengths as a creative writer. This, probably the most famous of his efforts although one of the shortest, sustains a note of mystery and the supernatural so successfully that since its first appearance it has graced virtually every important anthology concerned with the mystic side of human experience. The essence of its appeal lies not only in suspense, but in its gentle piety, its humbleness before God and man.

IN A one-roomed hut, high within the Arctic Circle, and only a little south of the eightieth parallel, six men were sitting—much as they had sat, evening after evening, for

months. They had a clock, and by it they divided the hours into day and night. As a matter of fact, it was always night. But the clock said half-past eight, and they called the time evening.

The hut was built of logs, with an inner skin of rough match-boarding, daubed with pitch. It measured seventeen feet by fourteen; but opposite the door four bunks—two above and two below—took a yard off the length, and this made the interior exactly square.

Each of these bunks had two doors, with brass latches on the inner side. The owner, if he chose, could shut himself up and go to sleep in a sort of cupboard. But as a rule, he closed one of them only—that by his feet. The other swung back, with its brass latch showing. The men kept these

latches in a high state of polish.

Across the angle of the wall, to the left of the door, and behind it when it opened, three hammocks were slung, one above another. No one slept in the uppermost.

But the feature of the hut was its fireplace; and this was merely a square hearth-stone, raised slightly above the floor, in the middle of the room. Upon it, and upon a growing mountain of soft grey ash, the fire burned always. It had no chimney, and so the men lost none of its warmth. The smoke ascended steadily and spread itself under the blackened beams and roof-boards in dense blue layers.

About eighteen inches beneath the spring of the roof there ran a line of small trap-doors with sliding panels, to admit the cold air, and below these the room was almost clear of smoke. A newcomer's eyes might have smarted, but these men stitched their clothes and read in comfort.

To keep the up-draught steady they had plugged every chink and crevice in the match-boarding below the trap-doors with moss, and paved the seams with pitch. The fire they fed from a stack of drift- and wreck-wood piled to the right of the door, and fuel for the fetching strewed the frozen beach outside—whole trees notched into lengths by lumberers' axes and washed thither from they knew not what continent. The wreck-wood came from their own ship, the *J. R. MacNeill*, which had brought them from Dundee.

They were Alexander Williamson, of Dundee, better known as the

Gaffer; David Faed, also of Dundee; George Lashman, of Cardiff; Long Ede, of Hayle, in Cornwall; Charles Silchester, otherwise the Snipe, of Ratcliff Highway or thereabouts; and Daniel Cooney, shipped at Tromsø six weeks before the wreck, an Irish-American by birth and of no known address.

The Gaffer reclined in his bunk, reading by the light of a smoky and evil-smelling lamp. He had been mate of the *J. R. MacNeill*, and was now captain as well as patriarch of the party. He possessed three books—the Bible, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and an odd volume of *The Turkish Spy*. Just now he was reading *The Turkish Spy*. The lamplight glinted on the rim of his spectacles and on the silvery hairs in his beard, the slack of which he had tucked under the edge of his blanket. His lips moved as he read, and now and then he broke off to glance mildly at Faed and the Snipe, who were busy beside the fire with a greasy pack of cards; or to listen to the peevish grumbling of Lashman in the bunk below him.

Lashman had taken to his bed six weeks before with scurvy, and complained incessantly; and, though they hardly knew it, these complaints were wearing the comrades' nerves to fiddle-strings—doing the mischief that cold and bitter hard work and the cruel loneliness had hitherto failed to do.

Long Ede lay stretched by the fire in a bundle of skins, reading in his only book, the Bible, open now at the Song of Solomon. Cooney had finished patching a pair of trousers,

and rolled himself in his hammock, whence he stared at the roof and the moonlight streaming up there through the little trap-doors and chivying the layers of smoke.

Whenever Lashman broke out into fresh quaverings of self-pity, Cooney's hands opened and shut again, till the nails dug hard into the palm. He groaned at length, exasperated beyond endurance.

"Oh, stow it, George! Hang it all, man!"

He checked himself, sharp and short: repentant, and rebuked by the silence of the others. They were good seamen all, and tender dealing with a sick shipmate was part of their code.

Lashman's voice, more querulous than ever, cut into the silence like a knife:

"That's it. You've thought it for weeks, and now you say it. I've knowed it all along. I'm just an encumbrance, and the sooner you're shut of me the better, says you. You needn't to fret. I'll be soon out of it; out of it—out there, alongside of Bill—"

"Easy there, matey." The Snipe glanced over his shoulder and laid his cards face downward. "Here, let me give the bed a shake up. It'll ease yer."

"It'll make me quiet, you mean. Plucky deal you care about easin' me, any of yer!"

"Get out with yer nonsense! Dan didn't mean it." The Snipe slipped an arm under the invalid's head and rearranged the pillow of skins and gunnybags.

"He didn't, didn't he? Let him say it then."

The Gaffer read on, his lips moving silently. Heaven knows how he had acquired this strayed and stained and filthy little demi-octavo with the arms of Saumarez on its bookplate—"The Sixth Volume of Letters writ by a Turkish Spy, who liv'd Five-and-Forty Years Undiscovered at Paris: Giving an Impartial Account to the *Dives at Constantinople* of the most remarkable Transactions of Europe, And discovering several *Intrigues* and *Secrets* of the *Christian Courts* (especially of that of *France*), etc., etc. Written originally in *Arabic*. Translated into *Italian*, and from thence into *English* by the Translator of the First Volume. The Eleventh Edition, London: Printed for G. Strahan, S. Ballard"—and a score of booksellers—"MDCCXII."

Heaven knows why he read it, since he understood about one-half, and admired less than one-tenth. The Oriental reflections struck him as mainly blasphemous. But the Gaffer's religious belief marked down nine-tenths of mankind for perdition: which perhaps made him tolerant.

At any rate, he read on gravely between the puffs of his short clay—

"On the 19th of this Moon, the King and the whole Court were present at a Ballet, representing the grandeur of the French monarchy. About the Middle of the Entertainment, there was an Antique Dance perform'd by twelve Masqueraders, in the suppos'd form of Daemons.

"But before they advanc'd far in their Dance, they found an Inter-

loper amongst 'em, who by encreasing the Number to thirteen, put them quite out of their Measure: for they practise every Step and Motion beforehand, till they are perfect. Being abash'd therefore at the unavoidable Blunders the thirteenth Antique made them commit they stood still like Fools, gazing at one another: None daring to unmask, or speak a Word; for that would have put all the Spectators into a Disorder and Confusion.

"Cardinal Mazarini (who was the chief Contriver of these Entertainments, to divert the King from more serious Thoughts) stood close by the young Monarch, with the Scheme of the Ballet in his Hand. Knowing therefore that this Dance was to consist but of twelve Antiques, and taking notice that there were actually thirteen, he at first imputed it to some Mistake.

"But, afterwards, when he perceived the Confusion of the Dancers, he made a more narrow Enquiry into the Cause of this Disorder. To be brief, they convinced the Cardinal that it could be no Error of theirs, by a kind of Demonstration, in that they had but twelve Antique Dresses of that sort, which were made on purpose for this particular Ballet.

"That which made it seem the greater Mystery was, that when they came behind the Scenes to uncase, and examine the Matter, they found but twelve Antiques, whereas on the Stage there were thirteen."

"Let him say it. Let him say he didn't mean it, the rotten Irishman!"

Cooney flung a leg wearily over the side of his hammock, jerked himself out, and shuffled across to the sick man's berth.

"Av coorse I didn' mane it. It just took me, ye see, lyin' up yondher and huggin' me thoughts in this—wilderness. I swear to ye, George: and ye'll just wet your throat to show there's no bad blood, and that ye belave me."

He took up a pannikin from the floor beside the bunk, pulled a hot iron from the fire, and stirred the frozen drink. The invalid turned his shoulder pettishly. "I didn't mane it," Cooney repeated. He set down the pannikin, and shuffled wearily back to his hammock.

The Gaffer blew a long cloud and stared at the fire; at the smoke mounting and the grey ash dropping; at David Faed dealing the cards and licking his thumb between each. Long Ede shifted from one cramped elbow to another and pushed his Bible near the blaze, murmuring, "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil our vines."

"Full hand," the Snipe announced.

"Ay," David Faed rolled the quid in his cheek. The cards were so thumbled and tattered that by the backs of them each player guessed pretty shrewdly what the other held. Yet they went on playing night after night; the Snipe shrilly blessing or cursing his luck, the Scotsman phlegmatic as a bolster.

"Play away, man. What ails ye?" he asked.

The Snipe had dropped both hands and sat up, stiff and listening.

"Whist! Outside the door."

All listened, "I hear nothing," said David, after ten seconds.

"Hush, man—listen! There, again."

They heard now. Cooney slipped down from his hammock, stole to the door and listened, crouching, with his ear close to the jamb. The sound resembled breathing—or so he thought for a moment. Then it seemed rather as if some creature were softly feeling about the door—fumbling its coating of ice and frozen snow.

Cooney listened. They all listened. Usually, as soon as they stirred from the scorching circle of the fire, their breath came from them in clouds. It trickled from them now in thin wisps of vapour. They could almost hear the soft grey ash dropping on the hearth.

A log spluttered. Then the invalid's voice clattered in:

"It's the bears—the bears! They've come after Bill, and next it'll be my turn. I warned you—I told you he wasn't deep enough. O Lord, have mercy . . . mercy!" He pattered off into a prayer, his voice and teeth chattering.

"Hush!" commanded the Gaffer gently; and Lashman choked on a sob.

"It ain't bears," Cooney reported, still with his ear to the door. "Least-ways, we've had bears before. The foxes, maybe. Let me listen."

Long Ede murmured: "Take us the foxes, the little foxes. . ."

"I believe you're right," the Gaffer announced cheerfully. "A bear would sniff louder—though there's no tell-

ing. The snow was falling an hour back, and I dessay 'tis pretty thick outside. If 'tis a bear, we don't want him fooling on the roof, and I mis-doubt the drift by the north corner is pretty tall by this time. Is he there still?"

"I felt something then—through the chink, here—like a warm breath. It's gone now. Come here, Snipe, and listen."

"'Breath,' eh? Did it *smell* like bear?"

"I don't know. I didn't smell nothing, to notice. Here, put your head down, close."

The Snipe bent his head. And at that moment the door shook gently. All stared; and saw the latch move up, up—and falteringly descend on the staple. They heard the click of it.

The door was secured within by two stout bars. Against these there had been no pressure. The men waited in a silence that ached. But the latch was not lifted again.

The Snipe, kneeling, looked up at Cooney. Cooney shivered and looked at David Faed. Long Ede, with his back to the fire, softly shook his feet free of the rugs. His eyes searched for the Gaffer's face.

But the old man had drawn back into the gloom of his bunk, and the lamplight shone only on a grey fringe of beard. He saw Long Ede's look, though, and answered it quietly as ever.

"Take a brace of guns aloft, and fetch us a look round. Wait, if there's a chance of a shot. The trap works. I tried it this afternoon with the small chisel."

Long Ede lit his pipe, tied down the ear-pieces of his cap, lifted a light ladder off its staples, and set it against a roof-beam. Then, with the guns under his arm, he quietly mounted. His head and shoulders wavered and grew vague to sight in the smoke-wreaths.

"Heard anything more?" he asked.

"Nothing since," answered the Snipe.

With his shoulder Long Ede pushed up the trap. They saw his head framed in a panel of moonlight, with one frosty star above it. He was wriggling through.

"Pitch him up a sleeping-bag, somebody," the Gaffer ordered, and Cooney ran with one.

"Thank'ee, mate," said Long Ede, and closed the trap.

They heard his feet stealthily crunching the frozen stuff across the roof. He was working towards the eaves over-lapping the door. Their breath tightened. They waited for the explosion of his gun. None came.

The crunching began again: it was heard down by the very edge of the eaves. It mounted to the blunt ridge overhead. Then it ceased.

"He will not have seen aught," David Faed muttered.

"Listen, you. Listen by the door again." They talked in whispers. Nothing; there was nothing to be heard. They crept back to the fire, and stood there warming themselves, keeping their eyes on the latch. It did not move.

After a while Cooney slipped off to his hammock; Faed to his bunk, alongside Lashman's. The Gaffer had

picked up his book again. The Snipe laid a couple of logs on the blaze, and remained beside it, cowering with his arms stretched out as if to embrace it. His shapeless shadow wavered up and down on the bunks behind him; and, across the fire, he still stared at the latch.

Suddenly the sick man's voice quavered out:

"It's not him they want—it's Bill! They're after Bill, out there! That was Bill trying to get in. Why didn't yer open? It was Bill, I tell yer!"

At the first word the Snipe had wheeled right-about-face. He stood now, pointing, and shaking like a man with the ague.

"Matey, for the love of God. . ."

"I won't hush. There's something wrong here tonight. I can't sleep. It's Bill, I tell yer. See his poor hammock up there shaking."

Cooney tumbled out with an oath and a thud. "Hush it, you white-livered swine! Hush it, or by—" His hand went behind him to his knife-sheath.

"Dan Cooney"—the Gaffer closed his book and leaned out—"go back to your bed."

"I won't, Sir. Not unless—"

"Go back."

"Flesh and blood—"

"Go back." And for the third time that night Cooney went back.

The Gaffer leaned a little farther over the ledge, and addressed the sick man.

"George, I went to Bill's grave not six hours ago. The snow of it wasn't even disturbed. Neither beast nor man, but only God, can break

up the hard earth he lies under. I tell you that, and you may lay to it. Now go to sleep."

LONG EDE crouched on the frozen ridge of the hut, with his feet in the sleeping-bag, his knees drawn up, and the two guns laid across them. The creature, whatever its name, that had tried the door, was nowhere to be seen. He decided to wait a few minutes on the chance of a shot—that is, until the cold should drive him below.

For the moment the clear tingling air was doing him good. The truth was, Long Ede had begun to be afraid of himself and of the way his mind had been running for the last forty-eight hours upon green fields and visions of spring. Biblical texts chattered within him like running brooks, and as they fled he could almost smell the blown meadow-scent.

"Take us the foxes, the little foxes . . . for our vines have tender grapes. . . . A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon. . . . Awake, O north wind, and come, thou south . . . blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. . . ."

He was light-headed, and he knew it. He must hold out. They were all going mad; were, in fact, three parts crazed already, all except the Gaffer. And the Gaffer relied on him as his right-hand man. One glimpse of the returning sun—one glimpse only—might save them yet.

He gazed out over the frozen hills, and northward across the ice-pack.

A few streaks of pale violet—the ghost of the Aurora—fronted the moon. He could see for miles. Bear or fox, no living creature was in sight.

But who could tell what might be hiding behind any one of a thousand hummocks? He listened. He heard the slow grinding of the ice-pack off the beach: only that. "Take us the foxes, the little foxes. . ."

This would never do. He must climb down and walk briskly, or return to the hut. Maybe there was a bear, after all, behind one of the hummocks, and a shot, or the chance of one, would scatter his head clear of these tom-fooling notions. He would have a search round.

What was that, moving, on a hummock, not five hundred yards away? He leaned forward to gaze.

Nothing now: but he had seen something. He lowered himself to the eaves by the north corner, and from the eaves to the drift piled there. The drift was frozen solid, but for a treacherous crust of fresh snow. His foot slipped upon this, and down he slid off a heap.

Luckily he had been careful to sling the guns tightly at his back. He picked himself up, and unstrapping one, took a step into the bright moonlight to examine the nipples; took two steps: and stood stock-still.

There, before him, on the frozen coat of snow, was a footprint. No: two, three, four—many footprints: prints of a naked human foot: right foot, left foot, both naked, and blood in each print—a little smear.

It had come, then. He was mad for certain. He saw them: he put his

fingers in them; touched the frozen blood. The snow before the door was trodden thick with them—some going, some returning.

"The latch . . . lifted." Suddenly he recalled the figure he had seen moving upon the hummock, and with a groan he set his face northward and gave chase. Oh, he was mad for certain! He ran like a madman—floundering, slipping, plunging in his clumsy moccasins.

"Take us the foxes, the little foxes. . . My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him. . . I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem. . . I charge you. . . I charge you. . ."

He ran thus for three hundred yards maybe, and then stopped as suddenly as he had started.

His mates—they must not see these footprints, or they would go mad too; mad as he. No, he must cover them up, all within sight of the hut. And tomorrow he would come alone, and cover those prints that were farther afield.

Slowly he retraced his steps. The footprints—those which pointed towards the hut and those which pointed away from it—lay close together. He knelt before each, breaking fresh snow over the hollows and carefully hiding the blood.

And now a great happiness filled his heart; interrupted once or twice as he worked by a feeling that someone was following and watching him. Once he turned northwards and gazed, making a telescope of his hands. He saw nothing, and fell again to his long task.

WHEN the hut the sick man cried softly to himself. Faed, the Snipe, and Cooney slept uneasily, and muttered in their dreams. The Gaffer lay awake, thinking. After Bill, George Lashman; and after George . . . ? Who next? And who would be the last—the unburied one?

The men were weakening fast; their wits and courage coming down at the end with a rush. Faed and Long Ede were the only two to be depended on for a day. The Gaffer liked Long Ede, who was a religious man. Indeed he had a growing suspicion that Long Ede, in spite of some amiable laxities of belief, was numbered among the Elect: or might be, if interceded for.

The Gaffer began to intercede for him silently; but experience had taught him that such "wrestlings," to be effective, must be noisy, and he dropped off to sleep with a sense of failure. . . .

THE SNIPE stretched himself, yawned, and awoke. It was seven in the morning: time to prepare a cup of tea. He tossed an armful of logs on the fire, and the noise awoke the Gaffer, who at once inquired for Long Ede. He had not returned.

"Go you up to the roof. The lad must be frozen."

The Snipe climbed the ladder, pushed open the trap, and came back, reporting that Long Ede was nowhere to be seen. The old man slipped a jumper over his suits of clothing — already three deep — reached for a gun, and moved to the door.

"Take a cup of something warm to fortify," the Snipe advised. "The kettle won't be five minutes boiling." But the Gaffer pushed up the heavy bolts and dragged the door open.

"What in the . . . ! Here, bear a hand, lads!"

Long Ede lay prone before the threshold, his outstretched hands almost touching it, his moccasins already covered out of sight by the powdery snow which ran and trickled incessantly—trickled between his long, dishevelled locks, and over the back of his gloves, and ran in a thin stream past the Gaffer's feet.

They carried him in and laid him on a heap of skins by the fire. They forced rum between his clenched teeth and beat his hands and feet, and kneaded and rubbed him. A sigh fluttered on his lips: something between a sigh and a smile, half seen, half heard. His eyes opened, and his comrades saw that it was really a smile.

"Wot cheer, mate?" It was the Snipe who asked.

"I—I seen. . ." The voice broke off, but he was smiling still.

What had he seen? Not the sun, surely! By the Gaffer's reckoning the sun would not be due for a week or two yet: how many weeks he could not say precisely, and sometimes he was glad enough that he did not know.

They forced him to drink a couple of spoonfuls of rum, and wrapped him up warmly. Each man contributed some of his own bedding. Then the Gaffer called to morning prayers,

and the three sound men dropped on their knees with him. Now, whether by reason of their joy at Long Ede's recovery, or because the old man was in splendid voice, they felt their hearts uplifted that morning with a cheerfulness they had not known for months.

Long Ede lay and listened dreamily while the passion of the Gaffer's thanksgiving shook the hut. His gaze wandered over their bowed forms. The Gaffer, David Faed, Dan Cooney, the Snipe, and—and George Lashman in his bunk, of course—and me. But, then, *who was the seventh?*

He began to count. There's myself—Lashman, in his bunk—David Faed, the Gaffer, the Snipe, Dan Cooney. . . One, two, three, four—well, but that made *seven*. Then who was the seventh? Was it George who had crawled out of bed and was kneeling there? Decidedly there were five kneeling. No: there was George, plain enough, in his berth, and not able to move.

Then who was the stranger? Wrong again: there was no stranger. He knew all these men—they were his mates. Was it—Bill? No, Bill was dead and buried: none of these was Bill, or like Bill. Try again—One, two, three, four, five—and us two sick men, seven. The Gaffer, David Faed, Dan Cooney—have I counted Dan twice? No, that's Dan, yonder to the right, and only one of him. Five men kneeling, and two on their backs: that makes seven every time. Dear God—suppose—

The Gaffer ceased, and, in the act

of rising from his knees, caught sight of Long Ede's face. While the others fetched their breakfast-cans, he stepped over, and whispered:

"Tell me. Ye've seen what?"

"Seen?" Long Ede echoed.

"Ay, seen what? Speak low—was it the sun?"

"The s—" But this time the echo died on his lips, and his face grew full of awe uncomprehending. It frightened the Gaffer.

Then Long Ede stirred. "Seven . . . count . . ." he whispered.

"Lord have mercy upon us!" the Gaffer muttered to his beard as he moved away. "Long Ede; gone crazed!"

And yet, though an hour or two ago this had been the worst that could befall, the Gaffer felt unusually cheerful. As for the others, they were like different men, all that day and through the three days that followed. Even Lashman ceased to complain.

"I declare, if I don't feel like pitching to sing!" the Snipe announced on the second evening, as much to his own wonder as theirs.

The Snipe struck up, then and there—"Villikins and his Dinah!" What is more, the Gaffer looked up from his *Paradise Lost*, and joined in the chorus.

By the end of the second day, Long Ede was up and active again. He went about with a dazed look in his eyes. He was counting, counting to himself, always counting. The Gaffer watched him furtively.

Since his recovery, though his lips moved frequently, Long Ede had scarcely uttered a word. But towards

noon on the fourth day he said an extraordinary thing:

"There's that sleeping-bag I took with me the other night. I wonder if 'tis on the roof still. It will be froze pretty stiff by this. Lou might nip up and see, Snipe, and"—he paused—"if you find it, stow it up yonder on Bill's hammock."

The Gaffer opened his mouth, but shut it again without speaking. The Snipe went up the ladder.

A minute passed; and then they heard a cry from the roof—a cry that fetched them all trembling, choking, weeping, to the foot of the ladder.

"Boys! boys!—the Sun!"

MONTHS later—it was June, and even George Lashman had recovered his strength—the Snipe came running with news of the whaling fleet. And on the beach, as they watched the vessels come to anchor, Long Ede told the Gaffer his story:

"It was a hall—a hallu—what d'ye call it, I reckon. I was crazed, eh?"

The Gaffer's eyes wandered from a brambly hopping about the lichen-covered boulders, and away to the sea-fowl wheeling above the ships; and then came into his mind a tale he had read once in *The Turkish Spy*. "I wouldn't say just that," he answered slowly.

"Anyway," said Long Ede, "I believe the Lord sent a miracle to save us all."

"I wouldn't say just that, either," the Gaffer objected. "I doubt it was meant just for you and me, and the rest were presairved, as you might say, incidentally."

MORRIS COOPER

PATTERN
FOR
DYING

THE one thing that kept me from going mad was what the other prisoners termed the deadly, monotonous routine. I have a passion for orderliness; for a life set and patterned. I like to know in advance what I will have for breakfast; I like the assurance that every event in my day is the result of planning.

I came to anticipate the hour each night after the prison lights went out. The thin, tight mattress held my body suspended, and for sixty minutes I thought of Tom Westdrake. Sixty minutes a night for ten years; an eternity of time to hate and remember—to hate Tom Westdrake

Justice, like love, serves mankind best when blind . . . so poets have argued since the days of Homer (blind himself). The taut bit of poetic justice which follows therefore places its author in distinguished company; and not for the first time, either. Along with other young argonauts, he became a widely traveled man in the East during the late unpleasantness—after his sleep had been rudely shattered at the Central YMCA, Honolulu, on a certain Sunday morning in December, 1941.

with a fervor that was my religion, to remember Lydia and the plans I had built around her. Those plans had been smashed the day Westdrake told me Lydia and he were going to marry.

We were in the cabin near Clear Lake—the same cabin we had bought the summer after we'd gone into business; the same cabin I'd brought Lydia to after fishing her out of the

lake when her boat had capsized.

Westdrake sounded like he was telling me about a fish he'd caught. "Lydia and I are going to be married next month."

A huge log blazed in the open fireplace, but I felt as chilled as though the icy waters of Clear Lake had engulfed me. My throat was dry and a sudden hatred of Tom Westdrake surged in my veins.

"So your money finally got her away from me," I said.

"You know that's not true, Harry," Westdrake spoke quietly. "We draw the same amount from the business. It's no fault of mine if your share slips through your fingers as though it were water."

"Look," I shouted, "the money's mine and I can do with it as I please."

Westdrake nodded his head. "I agree with you, Harry, as long as you rid yourself of the fool notion that Lydia is interested in money. We happen to love each other."

I tossed the trout fly I'd been working on into the fire and got up. I stood there, looking at Westdrake sprawled in the easy chair, his long legs thrust out in front of him, the flickering red of the fire throwing dancing shadows on his ruggedly handsome face. I jammed my fists into the pockets of my corduroy trousers and walked over to the window. The rippling waters of Clear Lake were silvered ebony in the moonlight.

When I finally spoke, I tried to keep my emotions under control. "Look, Tom, I'm in love with Lydia and I've planned a whole future

with her. You can't ruin my life like this."

Westdrake laughed. "The longer I know you, Trommer, the more your ego amazes me. Your life, your plans"—he slouched deeper into the chair and laughed again—"that's all that interests you. You're no more in love with Lydia than you are with the man in the moon. If you were, your first concern would be for her happiness."

The smile left his face. "If I thought for a moment you could make her happier than I could, I'd gladly step aside. But you're incapable of loving anyone except yourself."

I listened to that speech without moving a muscle, and when he finished, Tom Westdrake leaned his head back and closed his eyes, dismissing me. And suddenly I knew what I must do. Tom had become an impediment to me, an ink blot on my blueprint. Either I would have to draw up a set of new plans—or erase him.

I took the single-barreled shotgun from the rack next to the door, picked up a number-eight cartridge. He opened his eyes when he heard the click as my thumb cocked the hammer.

I gave him one more chance. "I don't want to kill you, Westdrake. But I promise you I will, unless you call off this marriage with Lydia."

Westdrake said, "You've been seeing too many movies, Trommer, and bad ones at that."

I squeezed the trigger.

Tom Westdrake didn't die, and I

got ten years. The judge said that it was an insufficient penalty to pay for the eyes Tom Westdrake lost, but that was the maximum the law allowed him to impose.

I tried to explain that it was all Westdrake's fault, that none of it would have happened if he hadn't upset my plans. The judge called me a homicidal maniac.

Tom Westdrake and Lydia were married the day I was sentenced, and that night I began my ten years of hate.

I closed the cabin door and leaned my back against the rough-knotted pine. Tom Westdrake sat in the same easy chair, his long legs sprawled in front of him, his hands crossed on his lap. The log fire danced shadows over his face, and for an instant it seemed as though the past ten years had never been—it seemed as if we were back to that day Tom had told me of his engagement to Lydia.

Then his voice broke the momentary spell. "Hello, Harry." It seemed softer, and held a strange understanding never there before. There were streaks of gray at his temples, and dark glasses hid the eyes which I had robbed of life.

"You don't seem surprised," I said.

"I knew you would come. That's why I've been waiting here for you . . . alone." The dark lenses of his glasses seemed to sparkle at me and a sudden suspicion came into my mind. I crossed the room in swift strides and jerked off his glasses.

I saw the twin holes; the dead scars that covered them looked like

the weatherworn ground over long-forgotten graves. Westdrake put out a groping hand and I leaped back as though it were stretched forth from hell.

He turned his head and his scarred eyes seemed to hold me in their grip. "If you're satisfied, I'd like my glasses."

I hurled them to the floor and ground them with my heel; the glass splinters ate and tore at the wooden floor. Then I laughed and sat down and the pounding left my heart. "So you had me followed," I said.

Westdrake shook his head. "No one followed you. I know how your mind works."

"Then it won't come as a shock that I mean to kill you."

Those dead eyes of his seemed to bore through me. "I know," he said. "That's why I've been waiting."

I went to the window—the clearing was deserted and there was no sign of life on the dead-calm lake. Westdrake followed my movements with his ears. "We're alone," he said, as though reading my mind.

I turned from the window. "You took ten years from my life and you took Lydia."

Tom Westdrake said, "They'll catch you. They'll catch you and they'll hang you."

I nodded agreement, as if he could see me. "I've been dead for ten years. They'll be hanging a dead man."

"You're crazy," Tom Westdrake said.

"Maybe." My hands felt cold and I walked over to the open fireplace.

"I'm in no hurry. I've waited ten years for this, and I want you to have time to think. Think of Lydia—and think of the life you stole from me." I felt the gentle warmth of the fire on my fingers.

Tom Westdrake sat there, silently. I wanted to see him hurt, to hear him cry out in pain. "You've got a couple of kids, haven't you?" I laughed. "A couple of kids that I made sure you'd never see."

His voice came so low I could barely hear. "A boy and a girl. That's why I waited here for you."

"Do you think they're going to change my mind?" I looked across the room at the gun rack, at the same shotgun I had used ten years before.

"No," Westdrake answered my question. "But I knew you'd come back to finish your job—to kill me, no matter where I was. And I didn't want to take a chance on any of them getting hurt."

"How thoughtful," I said. I walked over to the gun rack, slowly . . . so very slowly. His ears counted my steps, and I felt the concentrated hatred of ten years course like living fire through my veins. I took the shotgun from the rack and put a cartridge into the breach.

I watched Tom Westdrake. He sat there, waiting, like an actor who knows the lines in the script. There was no tenseness in his body, no sudden tightening of muscles for a last minute effort at escape. I clicked back the hammer and put the butt against

my shoulder.

"Damn you!" I cried. I wanted to see that look of peace vanish from his face. I wanted to see fear. And I knew how I could tear at his heart before he died.

I centered the barrel on Westdrake's face. "You think you've won, don't you? Then take this to hell with you. Before they get me, I'll send Lydia and her kids to keep you company."

I squeezed the trigger and the world flashed and thundered and blew up in my face.

My life is set now; I have my pattern of darkness that knows no difference between day and night. Tom Westdrake gave me this . . . in payment for the plans he upset.

Sometimes I hear again the voice that came when the thunder had died in my ears; and I remember the words spoken with startling clarity.

"Westdrake figured this joker would make another stab at him and he knew how his cracked brain worked. So he poured solder down the barrel of that shotgun until it was as solid as an iron rod. When Trommer pulled the trigger and fired that cartridge, the exploding gas had to go somewhere, and it blew the breech right into his face. He's a mess, but he'll live."

I wonder, sometimes, if the dead scars that cover my eyes look like the weatherworn ground over long-forgotten graves.

Gorgeous Tyraah and her
feathered flock held all this
ancient city in thrall

DARK



VENGEANCE

FRITZ LIEBER, JR.

Adept at both science-fiction and the ultra-imaginative fantasy, the 41-year-old author of this exceptional tale comes by both skills quite honestly. His science background includes studies in physics, chemistry, physiology, mathematics, and for the past six years he has been associate editor of Science Digest. His training for closely reasoned fantasy covers a long pursuit of metaphysics at the University of Chicago, a year at General Theological Seminary in New York—or should this come under another heading?—and two seasons as an actor with a Shakespearean company, his most successful role being the pretended madman Edgar in King Lear. The company, incidentally, belonged to that famous Shakespearean actor who bears the same name as, and happens to be the father of, young Fritz.

Lieber's superior brand of logic-plus-imagination has made him not only one of the more popular writers of our day, but also a formidable chess expert ready to take on all comers, man or robot.

FEAR hovered in the moonlight over Lankhmar, black-walled and proud metropolis of an ancient world unknown to history. Fear flowed like mist through the twisting thoroughfares and mazy alleyways, trickling even into that most intricately curved and crevicelike street where a sootily flickering lantern marked the doorway to the tavern of the Silver Eel.

It was a subtle fear, not the sort inspired by a besieging army, or warring nobles, or revolting slaves, or a mad overlord bent on wanton slaughter, or an enemy fleet sailing up the River Hlal. But it was none the less potent. It clutched the soft throats of the chattering women now entering the low doorway of the Silver Eel, making their laughter more sudden and shrill. It touched the women's

escorts too, making them speak louder and rattle their swords more than necessary.

This was a party of young aristocrats seeking excitement in a place known to be disreputable and somewhat dangerous. Their garments were rich and fantastic, after the fashion of the decadent Lankhmar nobility. But there was one thing that seemed almost too crazily faddish even in exotic Lankhmar. The head of each woman was enclosed in a small delicately-wrought silver bird cage.

Again the door opened, this time to emit two men who swiftly walked away. The one was tall and hulking, and seemed to be concealing some object under his great cloak. The other was small and lithe, clad from crown to toe in a soft gray that merged with the diffused moonlight. He was carrying a fishpole over his shoulder.

"I wonder what Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are up to now," murmured a hanger-on, peering curiously over his shoulder. The landlord shrugged.

"No good, I'll warrant," pressed the hanger-on. "I saw the thing under Fafhrd's cloak move, as if alive. Today, in Lankhmar, that is most suspicious. You see what I mean? And then the fishpole."

"Peace," said the landlord. "They are two honest rogues, even though much in need of money, if what they owe me for wine is any indication. Say nothing against them."

But he looked a trifle puzzled and perturbed as he went inside again,

impatiently pushing the hanger-on ahead of him.

IT WAS three months since the fear had come to Lankhmar, and at the beginning it had been a very different sort of thing—hardly fear at all. Just an overly numerous series of thefts of trinkets and gems, with women the chief sufferers. Bright and shining objects, no matter what their nature, were given the preference.

Gossip had it that a band of exceptionally light-fingered and haphazard pilferers was making a specialty of the tiring rooms of great ladies, though the whipping of maids and body-slaves failed to uncover any of the expected confederates. Then someone advanced the theory that it was the work of cunning children too young to judge well the value of objects.

But gradually the character of the thefts began to change. Fewer worthless baubles were taken. More and more often, valuable gems were plucked from a jumble of glass and gilt, giving the odd impression that the marauders were developing a sense of discrimination.

At about this time people began to suspect that the ancient and almost reputable Thieves Guild of Lankhmar had invented a new stratagem, and there was talk of torturing a few suspected leaders or waiting for a favorable wind and burning the Thieves' Quarter.

But since the Thieves Guild was a conservative and hidebound organization wedded to traditional meth-

ods of thievery, suspicion shifted somewhat when it became increasingly evident that a mentality of incredible daring and ingenuity was at work.

Valuables disappeared in broad daylight, even from chambers locked and carefully guarded, or from sheer-walled roof-gardens. A lady secure in her tiring room chanced to lay a bracelet on an inaccessible window-ledge; it vanished while she chatted with a friend. A lord's daughter, walking in a private garden, felt someone reach down from a thickly-leaved tree and snatch a diamond pin from her hair; the tree was immediately climbed by nimble servitors, but nothing was found.

Then an hysterical maid ran to her mistress with the information that she had just seen a large bird, black in color, making off through a window with an emerald ring clutched securely in its talons.

This story at first met with angry disbelief. It was illogically concluded that the girl herself must have stolen the ring. She was whipped almost to death amid general approval.

The next day a large black bird swooped down on the niece of the Overlord and ripped a jewel from her ear.

Many corroborations were immediately forthcoming. People told of seeing birds of unusual appearance at odd times and places. It was recalled that in each of the thefts an aerial route had been left open. The victims began to remember things that had seemed inconsequential at the time—the beat of wings, the

rustle of feathers, bird tracks and droppings, hovering shadows and the like.

All Lankhmar buzzed with amazed speculation. It was believed, however, that the thefts would cease, now that the authors were known, and suitable precautions taken. No especial significance was attached to the injured ear of the Overlord's niece. Both these judgments proved wrong.

Two days later, the notorious courtesan Lessnya was beset by a large black bird while crossing a wide square. Forewarned, Lessnya struck at the bird with a gilt wand she was carrying, shouting to scare it off.

To the horror of onlookers, the bird eluded the wild blows, set its talons in her white shoulder, and pecked her right eye viciously. Thereupon it gave a shuddering squawk, flapped its wings, and took off amid a flurry of black feathers, gripping a jade brooch in its claws.

Within the next three days, five more women were robbed in the same way; three of these were mutilated.

Lankhmar was frightened. Such unwholesomely purposeful behavior on the part of birds roused all sorts of superstitious fear. Bowmen armed with triple-pronged fowling-arrows were stationed on the roofs. Timid women stayed indoors, or wore cloaks to hide their jewels. Shutters were kept closed at night despite the late summer heat. Considerable numbers of innocent pigeons and gulls were shot or poisoned. Cocky young nobles summoned their falconers and

went hawking after the marauders.

But they had difficulty in locating any; and on the few occasions they did, their falcons found themselves opposed to adversaries who flew swiftly and fought back successfully. More than one mew mourned the death of a favorite fighting bird. All efforts to trace the marauders failed.

These activities did have one tangible result. Most of the attacks and thefts thereafter occurred during the hours of darkness.

Then a woman died painfully three hours after having been clawed around the neck, and black-robed physicians averred that there must have been a virulent poison in the wounding talons.

Panic grew and wild theories were bruited abroad. The priests of the Great God maintained that it was a divine rebuke to feminine vanity, and made dire prophecies about an imminent revolt of all animals against sinful man. Astrologers dropped dark and disturbing hints. A frantic mob burned a rookery belonging to a wealthy grain merchant, and then milled through the streets, stoning all birds and killing three of the sacred black swans before being dispersed.

Still the attacks continued. And Lankhmar, with her usual resiliency, began to adjust herself somewhat to this bizarre and inexplicable siege from the sky. Rich women made a fashion of their fear by adopting silver networks to protect their features. Several wits made jokes about how, in a topsy-turvy world, the birds were loose and the women

wore the cages. The courtesan Less-nya had her jeweler contrive a lustrous eye of hollow gold, which men said added to her exotic beauty.

Then Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser appeared in Lankhmar. No one knew where the huge northern barbarian and his small, dexterous companion had been or why they had come at this particular time. Nor did Fafhrd or the Gray Mouser offer any explanations.

They busied themselves with inquiries at the Silver Eel and elsewhere, drinking much wine but avoiding brawls. Through certain devious channels of information the Mouser learned that the fabulously wealthy but socially unacceptable moneylender Muulsh had bought a famous ruby from the King of the East—then hard-pressed for cash—and was going to give it to his wife. Whereupon the Mouser and Fafhrd made further inquiries and certain secret preparations, and slipped away together from the tavern of the Silver Eel on a moonlit night, bearing objects of a mysterious nature which awakened doubts and suspicions in the mind of the landlord and others.

For there was no denying that the thing Fafhrd carried carefully muffled in his great cloak suggested strongly a large, trained bird of some sort.

Moonlight did not soften the harsh angular lines of the great stone house of Muulsh the moneylender. Square, flat-roofed, small-windowed, three stories high, it stood a little distance from the similar houses of

the wealthy grain merchants like a rejected hanger-on.

Close to it flowed the waters of the River Hlal, angrily churning past this portion of the city, which thrust out like an elbow into the mighty stream. Abutting and o'ertopping it on the side nearest the river loomed a lightless, towerlike structure, one of the several accursed and abandoned temples of Lankmar, shut up in ancient times for reasons now known only to certain priests and necromancers.

Crowding close on the other side were the dark, solid forms of warehouses. There was an impression of tight-lipped power about this house of Muulsh—of great wealth and weighty secrets closely guarded.

But the Gray Mouser, peering down through one of the usual Lankmarian roof-windows into the tiring room of Muulsh's wife, was seeing a very different aspect of Muulsh's character. The notoriously heartless moneylender, quailing under a connubial tongue-lashing, looked like nothing so much as a fawning lapdog—except perhaps an anxious and solicitous hen.

"You worm! You slug! You gross, fat beast!" his slender young wife railed at him, almost chanting the words. "You've ruined my life with your stinking money-grubbing! Not one noblewoman will even speak to me. Not one lord or grain merchant so much as dares flirt with me. Everywhere I am ostracized. And all because your fingers are greasy and vile from handling coins!"

"But Atya," he murmured timidly,

"I've always thought you had friends to visit. Almost every day you go off for hours on end—though without telling me where you've been."

"You insensitive clod!" she cried. "Is it any wonder that I slip away to some lonely nook to weep and seek bitter consolation, in private? You will never understand the delicacy of my emotions. Why did I ever marry you? I wouldn't have, you may be sure—except that you forced my poor father into it when he was in difficulties. You bought me! It's the only way you know of getting anything."

"And then when my poor father died, you had the effrontery to buy this house, his house, the house I was born in. You did it to complete my humiliation. To take me back where everybody knew me and could say, 'There goes the wife of that utterly impossible moneylender'—if they use such a polite word as wife! All you want is to torture and degrade me, drag me down to your own unutterable level. Oh, you obscene pig!"

And she made a tattoo with her gilded heels on the gleaming parquetry of the floor. Clad in yellow silk tunic and pantaloons, she was very pretty in a small, slight way. Her small-chinned, bright-eyed face was oddly attractive under its canopy of gleamingly smooth black hair. Her swift movements had the quality of restless fluttering. At the moment her every gesture conveyed anger and unbearable irritation, but there was also a kind of studied ease about her manner that suggested to the Mouser, who was hugely enjoy-

ing everything, a scene that had been played and replayed many times.

The room suited her well, with its silken hangings and fragile furniture. Low tables, scattered about, were crowded with jars of cosmetics, bowls of sweetmeats, and all sorts of frivolous bric-a-brac. The flames of slim tapers swayed in the warm breeze from the open windows.

On delicate chains were suspended a full dozen cages of canaries, nightingales, love birds, and other tiny warblers, some drowsing, others chirruping sleepily. Here and there were strewn small fluffy rugs. All in all, a very downy nest amidst the stoniness of Lankhmar.

Muulsh was somewhat as she had described him—fat, ugly, and perhaps twenty years older than she. His gaudy tunic fitted him like a sack. The look of mingled apprehension and desire he fixed upon his wife was irresistibly comic.

"Oh, Atya, my little dove, do not be angry with me. I try so hard to please you, and I love you so very much," he cried, and tried to lay his hand on her arm. She eluded him. He hurried clumsily after her, immediately bumping into one of the bird cages, which hung at an inconvenient height. She turned on him in a miniature fury.

"Disturb my pets, will you, you brute! There, there, my dears, don't be frightened. It's just the old she-elephant."

"Damn your pets!" he cursed impulsively, holding his forehead. Then he recollected himself and dodged backward, as if in fear of being

thwacked with a slipper.

"Oh! So in addition to all your other crude affronts, we are also to be damned?" she said, her voice suddenly icy.

"No, no, my beloved Atya. I forgot myself. I love you very much, and your feathered pets as well. I meant no harm."

"Of course you meant no harm! You merely want to torment us to death. You want to degrade and—"

"But Atya," he interrupted placatingly, "I don't think I've really degraded you. Remember, even before I married you, your family never mingled with Lankhmar society."

That remark was a mistake, as the eavesdropping Mouser, choking back his laughter, could plainly see. Muulsh must have realized it too, for as Atya went white and reached for a heavy crystal bottle, he retreated and cried out, "I've brought you a present."

"I can imagine what it's like," she sneered disdainfully, relaxing a trifle but still holding the bottle poised. "Some trinket a lady would give her maid. Or flashy rags fit only for a harlot."

"Oh, no, my dear. This is a gift for an empress."

"I don't believe you. It's because of your foul taste and filthy manners that Lankhmar won't accept me." Her fine, decadently weak features contracted in a pout, her charming bosom still rising and falling from anger. "'She's the concubine of Muulsh the moneylender,' they say, and snigger at me. Snigger!"

"They've no right to. I can buy

the lot of them! Just wait until they see you wearing my gift. It's a jewel that the wife of the Overlord would give her eyeteeth to possess!"

At mention of the word "jewel" the Mouser sensed a subtle shiver of anticipation run through the room. More than that, he saw one of the silken hangings stir in a way that the lazy breeze could hardly account for.

He edged cautiously forward, craning his neck, and peered down sideways into the space between the hangings and the wall. Then slowly a smile of elfish amusement appeared on his compact, snub-nosed face.

Crouched in the faintly amber luminescence that filtered through the draperies were two scrawny men, naked except for dark breech-cloths. Each carried a bag big enough to fit loosely over a human head. From these bags leaked a faint soporific scent that the Mouser had noticed before without being able to place.

The Mouser's smile deepened. Noiselessly he drew forward the slim fishpole at his side and inspected the line and the stickily-smeared claw-like arrangement that served for a hook.

"Show me the jewel!" said Atya.

"I shall, my dear. At once," answered Muulsh. "But don't you think we'd first best close the sky-window and the other ones?"

"We'll do nothing of the kind!" snapped Atya. "Must I stifle just because a lot of old women have given way to a silly fear?"

"But my dove, it's not a silly fear. All Lankhmar is afraid. And rightly."

He moved as though to call a slave. Atya stamped her foot pettishly. "Stop, you fat coward! I refuse to give way to childish frights. I won't believe any of those fantastic stories, no matter how many great ladies swear to them. Don't you dare have the windows closed. Show me the jewel at once, or—or I'll never be nice to you again."

She seemed close to hysteria. Muulsh sighed and resigned himself.

"Very well, my sweet."

He walked over to an inlaid table by the door, clumsily ducking past several bird cages, and fumbled at a small casket. Four pairs of eyes followed him intently. When he returned there was something in his hand that glittered. He set it down on the center of the table.

"There," he said, stepping back. "I told you it was fit for an empress, and it is."

For a dozen heartbeats there was breathless silence in the room. The two thieves behind the draperies edged forward hungrily, quietly loosening the drawstrings of the bags, their feet caressing the polished floor like cats' paws.

The Mouser slid the slim fishing rod through the sky-window, avoiding the silver chains of the cages, until the pendant claw was poised directly above the center of the table, like a spider preparing to drop on an unsuspecting beetle.

Atya stared. A new dignity and self-respect crept into Muulsh's expression. The jewel gleamed like a fat, lucent, quivering drop of blood.

The two thieves crouched to

spring. The Mouser joggled the rod slightly, gauging his aim before he dropped the claw. Atya reached out an eager hand and moved toward the table.

But all these intended actions were simultaneously interrupted.

There was a beat and whirr of powerful wings. An inky bird a little larger than a crow flapped through a side window and skidded down into the room, like a fragment of blackness detached from the outer night. Its talons made arm-long scratches as it hit the table. Then it arched its neck, gave a loud, shuddering squawk, and launched itself toward Atya.

The room whirled with chaotic movements. The gummed claw halted midway in its drop. The two thieves fought ungracefully to keep their balance and avoid being seen. Muulsh waved his arms and shouted, "Shoo! Shoo!" Atya collapsed.

The black bird swept close past Atya, its wings brushing and striking the silver cages, and beat out into the night.

Again there was momentary silence in the room. Even the gentle songbirds had been stilled by the incursion of their raptorial brother. The rod vanished through the sky-window. The two thieves scuttled behind the draperies and noiselessly edged toward a door. Their looks of bafflement and fright were giving way to professional chagrin.

Atya rose to her knees, dainty hands pressed to her face. A shudder tightened around Muulsh's fleshy neck and he moved toward her.

"Did it—did it hurt you? Your face. It struck at you."

Atya dropped her hands, revealing an unmaimed countenance. She stared at her husband. Then all at once the stare changed to a glare, like a pot suddenly come to a boil.

"You big useless hen!" she cried out. "For all you cared, it might have pecked out both my eyes! Why didn't you do something? Yelling 'Shoo! Shoo!' when it struck at me! And the jewel gone forever now! Oh, you miserable capon!"

She rose to her feet, taking off one of her slippers with a wildly determined air. Muulsh retreated, protesting, and bumped into a whole cluster of bird cages.

ONLY Fafhrd's tossed-aside cloak marked the spot where the Gray Mouser had left him. Hastening to the roof-edge, he made out Fafhrd's large form some distance away across the roofs of the adjoining warehouses. The barbarian was shifting around in a strangely jerky way, apparently gawking at the moon-soft sky. The Mouser gathered up the cloak, leaped the narrow gap, and followed.

When the Mouser reached him, Fafhrd was grinning with great satisfaction so that his big white teeth showed. The size of his supple, brawny frame and the amount of metal-studded leather he wore in the form of arm-bands and broad belt were as much out of tune with civilized Lankhmar as were his long, copper hair, handsomely rugged features, and pale northern skin, ghost-

ly in the moonlight. Firmly clutching his heavy hawking-glove at the wrist was a white-capped eagle, which ruffled its feathers and made a disagreeable gargling noise in its throat at the Mouser's approach.

"Now tell me I can't hawk by full moon!" he cried out in great good humor. "I don't know what happened in the room, or what luck you had, but as for the black bird that went in and came out—Lo! It is here!"

He pushed at a limp bundle of black feathers with his foot.

The Mouser hissed the names of several gods in quick succession, then asked, "But the jewel?"

"I don't know about that," said Fafhrd, brushing the matter aside. "Ah, but you should have seen it, little man! A wondrous flight!" His voice regained its enthusiasm. "The other one flew swift and cunningly but Kooskra here rose like the north wind up a mountain pass. For a while I lost them in the gray. There seemed to be something of a fight. Then Kooskra brought him down."

The Mouser had dropped to his knees and was gingerly examining Kooskra's quarry. He slipped a small knife from his belt.

"And to think," continued Fafhrd, as he adjusted a leather hood over the eagle's head, "that they told me these birds were demons or fierce phantasms of darkness! Faugh! They're only ungainly, night-flying crows."

"You talk too loud," said the Mouser. Then he looked up. "But there's no gainsaying that tonight

the eagle beat the fishpole. See what I found in this one's gullet. He kept it to the end."

Fafhrd snatched the ruby with his free hand and held it up to the moon.

"King's ransom!" he cried. "Mouser, our fortune's made! I see it all. We shall follow these birds as they rob and let Kooskra rape them of their booty." He laughed aloud.

This time there was no warning beat of wings—only a gliding shadow which grazed Fafhrd's upraised hand and slid silently away. It almost came to rest on the roof, then flapped powerfully upward.

"Blood of Kos!" cursed Fafhrd, waking from his dumfounded amazement. "Mouser, he's taken it!" Then, "At him, Kooskra! At him!" as he swiftly unhooded the eagle.

But this time it was apparent from the first that something was wrong. The beat of the eagle's wings was slow, and he seemed to have difficulty gaining height. Nevertheless he drew near the quarry. The black bird veered suddenly, swooped, and rose again. The eagle followed close, though his flight was still unsteady.

Wordlessly Fafhrd and the Mouser watched the birds approach the massive, high-reared tower of the deserted temple, until their feathered forms were silhouetted against its palely-glowing, ancient surface.

Kooskra seemed then to recover full power. He gained a superior position, hovered while his quarry frantically darted and wheeled, then lifted his great wings and plummeted down.

"Get him, by Kos!" breathed Fafhrd, thumping his knee with his fist.

But it was not so. Kooskra struck at thin air. At the last moment the black bird had slipped aside and taken cover in one of the high-set windows of the tower.

And now it was certain beyond doubt that something was wrong with Kooskra. He sought to beat about the embrasure sheltering his quarry, but lost height. Abruptly he turned and flew out from the wall. His wings moved in an irregular and convulsive way. Fafhrd's fingers tightened apprehensively on the Mouser's shoulder.

As Kooskra reached a point above them, he gave a great wild scream, defiant yet somehow pitiable, that shook the soft Lankhmar night. Then he fell, like a dead leaf, circling and spinning purposelessly. Only once again did he seem to make an effort to command his wings, and then to no avail.

He landed heavily a short distance from them. When Fafhrd reached the spot, Kooskra was dead.

The barbarian knelt there, absently smoothing the feathers, staring up at the tower. Puzzlement, anger, and some sorrow lined his face.

"Fly north, old bird," he murmured in a deep, small voice. "Fly into nothingness, Kooskra." Then he spoke to the Mouser. "I find no wounds. Nothing touched him on this flight, I'll swear."

"It happened when he brought down the other," said the Mouser soberly. "You did not look at the

tokens of that ugly fowl. They were smeared with a greenish stuff. Through some small gouge it entered him. Death was in him while he sat on your wrist, and it worked faster when he flew at the black bird."

Fafhrd nodded, still staring at the tower. "We've lost a fortune and a faithful killer, tonight. But the night's not done. I have a curiosity about these death-dealing shadows."

"What are you thinking?" asked the Mouser.

"That a man might easily swing and hurl a weighted line over a corner of that tower, and that I have such a line wound around my waist. We used it to mount Muulsh's roof, and I shall use it again. Don't waste your words, little man. Muulsh? What have we to fear from him? He saw a bird take the jewel. Why should he send guards to search the roofs?"

"Yes, I know the bird will fly away when I go after him. But he may drop the jewel, or you may get in a lucky cast with your sling. Besides, I have a special notion about these matters. Poison claws? I'll wear my gloves and cloak, and carry a naked dagger. Come on, little man. We'll not argue. That corner away from Muulsh's and the river should do the trick. The one where the tiny broken spire rises."

THE MOUSER hummed a fragment of song under his breath and kept glancing around apprehensively, as he steadied the big-knotted, double line by which Fafhrd was mounting

the wall of the tower-temple. He felt decidedly ill at ease, what with Fafhrd on a fool's errand, and the night's luck probably run out, and the ancient temple standing there so silent and desolate.

It was forbidden on pain of death to enter such places, and no man knew what evil things might lurk there, fattening on loneliness. Besides all that, the moonlight was too revealing; he winced at the thought of what excellent targets he and Fafhrd made against the wall.

In his ears droned the low but mighty clamor of the waters of the Hilal, which swished and eddied past the base of the opposite wall. Once it seemed to him that the temple itself vibrated, as though the Hilal were gnawing at its vitals. But that was fancy.

Before his feet yawned the dark, six-foot chasm separating the warehouse from the temple. It allowed a sidewise glimpse of the walled temple-garden, overgrown with pale weeds and clogged with decay.

And now as he glanced in that direction he saw something that made him raise his eyebrows and sent a shiver crawling over his scalp. For across the moonlit space stole a manlike but unwholesomely bulky figure.

The Mouser's impression was that the strange body lacked the characteristic human curves and taperings of limb, that its face lacked features, that it was unpleasantly froglike in appearance. It seemed to be colored a uniform dull brown.

It vanished in the direction of the

temple. What it was, the Mouser could not for the moment conjecture.

Intent on warning Fafhrd, he looked up, but the barbarian was already swinging into the embrasure at a dizzy height above. Disliking to shout, he paused undecided, half of a mind to skin up the line and join his comrade. All the while he kept humming a fragment of song—one used by thieves and supposed to enforce slumber on the inmates of a house being robbed. He wished fervently that the moon would get under a cloud, so he would lose that exposed, naked feeling.

Then, as if his fear had fathered a reality, something roughly grazed his ear and hit with a deadened thump against the temple wall. He knew what that meant—a ball of wet clay projected by a sling.

As he let his body collapse, two similar missiles followed the first. Close range, he could tell from the impact, and designed to kill rather than stun. He scanned the moonlit roof, but could see nothing. Before his knees touched the roof he had decided what he must do if he were to help Fafhrd at all. There was one quick way of retreat and he took it.

He grasped the long slack of the rope and dove into the chasm between the buildings, as three more balls of clay flattened against the wall.

AS FAFHRD warily swung into the embrasure and found solid footing, he realized what had been bothering him about the character of the weatherworn carvings on the ancient

walk. In one way or another they all seemed to be concerned with birds—raptorial birds in particular—and with human beings having grotesque avian features: beaked heads, batlike wings, and taloned limbs.

There was a whole border of such creatures around the embrasure, and the projecting stone ornament over which he hooked the knotted line represented the notch-beaked head of a hawk. This unpleasant coincidence loosened the stout gates of fear within him, and a faint sense of awe and imminent horror trickled into his mind, extinguishing a part of his anger at Kooskra's repellent death. But at the same time it served to confirm certain vague notions that had come to him earlier.

He looked around. The black bird seemed to have retreated into the interior of the tower, where tenuous moonlight revealed an obscurely littered stone floor and a door half open on a rectangle of blackness. Whipping out a long knife, he tread softly inward, shifting his weight slowly from one foot to the other in apprehension of possible weaknesses in the centuries-old masonry.

It grew darker, and then a little lighter, as his straining eyes accustomed themselves to the dimness. The stone beneath his feet became slippery. And in stronger and stronger waves there was borne to his nostrils the pungent, musty smell of a mews.

There was an intermittent soft rustling, too. He told himself it was only natural that birds of some sort—perhaps pigeons—should nest in

this deserted structure, but a darker train of reasoning insisted that his previous speculations were right.

He passed a projecting panel of stone and came into the chief upper chamber of the tower.

Moonlight striking through two gaps in the ceiling high above vaguely revealed alcoved walls, which widened away from him toward the left. The sound of the Hlal was muted and deepened here, as though it rose up more through the stones than through the air. He was very close, now, to the half-open door.

He noted a tiny grilled opening in it, like that of a cell. Rising against the wall at the broad end of the room was what seemed to be an altar of some sort, embellished by indistinct sculptures. And on either side of it, in regular terraces like those of the altar itself, were tier on tier of small black blots.

Then he heard a raucous, falsetto cry, "Man! Man! Kill! Kill!" and saw a portion of the black blots launch themselves from the tiers, expanding in size as they spread their wings and converged upon him.

And largely because his fear had been expecting this, he jerked up his cloak to protect his naked head and whirled his knife at them in sweeping strokes. This close he could see them better: inky-feathered, cruelly taloned birds, each a brother to the two Kooskra had fought, squawking, squawling, striking at him like fighting-cocks able to fly.

At first he thought he could readily beat them off, but it was like fighting an eddying storm of shad-

ows. Perhaps he struck two or three. He could not tell. And it made no difference. He felt talons grasp and prick his left wrist through the thin leather guarding it.

Then, because it seemed the only thing to do, he leaped through the half-open door, slammed it behind him, knifed off the bird that clung like death to his wrist, stripped off the glove, found the pricks by touch, nicked them with his knife, and sucked for the poison that might have been on the talons.

His shoulder instinctively pressed against the door, he listened to their baffled flapping and angry croaking. From here he could not escape; this inner room was indeed nothing but a cell, lightless save for the trace of moonlight that filtered through the grilled hole in the door. He could conjecture no even half-safe way of regaining the embrasure and descending—they would have him completely at their mercy as he clung to the knotted rope.

He wanted to bellow a warning to the Mouser, but was afraid that his shouts, probably unintelligible at the distance, would only summon the Mouser into the same trap. In a rage of uncertainty he trod vindictively the body of the bird he had slain.

Gradually his fears and anger calmed somewhat. The birds seemed to have retreated. No longer did they swoop futilely against the door or cling screaming to the grillwork in the opening.

Through this aperture he could gain a fair view of the shadowy altar and the ladderlike perches. The black

occupants were restless, edging back and forth, crowding one another, flurrying excitedly from perch to perch. The air was heavy with their smell.

And then he heard again the raucous, falsetto voice, only this time there was more than one.

"Jewels, jewels. Bright, bright."

"Sparkling ones. Shining ones."

"Ear to tear. Eye to peck."

"Cheek to scratch. Neck to claw."

And this time there was no doubting that it was the birds themselves who spoke. Fafhrd stared, fascinated. He had heard birds talk before—cursing parrots and slit-tongued ravens. Here there was the same monotony of tone and impression of mindlessness, the same vituperative repetitions. Indeed he had known parrots able to mimic human voices much more accurately.

But the phrases themselves were so devilishly apt and so suggestive of malign intent that he momentarily feared they would cease to be mere isolated chatterings and become an intelligent discourse, with question and answer fitting. And he could not forget that undeniably purposeful command, "Man! Man! Kill! Kill!"

As he listened spellbound to their cruel chorus, a figure stole past the grilled opening toward the altar. It was manlike only in its general form, featureless, with a uniform, leathery brown surface, like a heavy-hided, hairless bear. He saw the birds launch themselves at this strange figure too, and swarm around it, squawling and striking.

But it paid them no attention

whatever, as though it were immune to beaks and poisoned claws. It strode unhurriedly with upraised head toward the altar. There the shifting moonlight from a gap above now struck almost vertically, making a pallid puddle on the floor before the altar itself, and Fafhrd saw the creature fumble at a large casket and begin to lift out small things that gleamed and glittered, unmindful of the birds which swirled around in ever greater numbers.

Then the creature moved so that the moonlight fell full upon it, and Fafhrd saw that it was a man clad in an ungainly suit of thick leather, with two long thin slits for eyeholes. He was clumsily but methodically transferring the contents of the casket to a leather bag he carried. And Fafhrd realized that the casket had been the cache for the many jewels and trinkets the birds had stolen.

The leather-armored form completed its task and strode off the way it had come, still surrounded by the small, black stormcloud of perplexedly squawking birds.

But as the figure came opposite Fafhrd the birds suddenly dropped away from it and flew back toward the altar, as if in obedience to a command that had come to them through the general din. The leather-armored form stopped dead and glanced searchingly around, the long eye-slits giving it an appearance of cryptic menace.

Then it started forward again. But simultaneously a noose dropped and tightened like a drawstring around the leather bag that formed its head.

The figure began to struggle and to stagger erratically, pawing at its neck with its leather-cased hand. Then it flailed both arms around in a ponderous, desperate way, so that the bag it still held came open and spurted jewels and jeweled metal. Finally a cunning jerk of the lasso sprawled it on the floor.

Fafhrd chose this moment to make a break for freedom. He relied on confusion and surprise. But in this he was not wise. Perhaps the trace of poison in his veins had touched his mind a little.

He almost reached the passage leading to the embrasure before a second noose tightened cruelly around his own throat. His running feet went out from under him and his skull thumped the floor as he fell. The noose tightened further until he felt he was suffocating in a sea of black feathers wherein all the jewels of the world flashed blindingly.

As consciousness painfully pounded its way back into his skull, he heard a voice crying out frightenedly and jerkily:

"In the name of the Great God, who are you? What are you?"

Then a second voice answering—high, sweet, swift, birdlike, imperious, icy: "I am the winged priestess, mistress of the hawks. I am the clawed queen, the feathered princess, incarnation of She who has ruled here forever, despite priests' interdict and Overlord's command. I am she who visits suitable injury on the haughty and voluptuous women of Lankhmar. I am she who sends messengers to take the tribute that was

once laid freely though tremblingly upon my altar."

Then the first voice spoke, in great apprehension, though not weakly: "But you cannot mean to doom me in so hideous a way. I will keep your secrets well. I am only a thief."

Then the second voice again, "You are indeed a thief, for you sought to ravish the altar-treasure of Winged Tyaa, and for that crime the birds of Tyaa mete out punishment as they see fit. If they think you deserve mercy they will not kill; only tear out an eye—or, perhaps, two."

There was a trilling and chirruping quality to the voice, so that Fafhrd's tortured brain kept picturing some impossibly monstrous song-bird. He sought to struggle to his feet, but found he was bound tightly to a chair. His arms and legs were numb, his left arm in addition ached and burned from the poison.

Then the soft moonlight ceased to be so much of a shooting pain, and he saw he was still in the same chamber, near the grilled door, facing the altar. Beside him was another chair, and in it sat the leather-armored man, similarly bound. But the leather hood had been removed, revealing the shaven skull and pockmarked, heavy-featured face of a man whom Fafhrd recognized — Stravas, the Master Thief.

"Tyaa, Tyaa," squawked the birds. "Eyes to peck. Nose to rip."

The eyes of Stravas were dark creases of fear between his shaven brows and thick cheeks. He spoke again toward the altar.

"I am a thief. Yes. But so are you.

The gods of this temple are banned and forbidden. The Great God himself cursed them. Centuries ago they left this place. Whatever else you may be, you are an interloper. Somehow, perhaps by magic, you taught the birds to steal, knowing that many of them by nature like to pilfer shining things. What they steal, you take.

"You are no better than I, who guessed your secret and contrived a way to rob you in turn. You are no priestess, meting out death for sacrilege. Where are your worshippers? Where is your priesthood? Where are your benefactions? You are a thief!"

He strained tautly forward against his bonds, as if wanting to hurl himself toward the doom that might answer his reckless speech. Then Fafhrd saw, standing behind Stravas, a figure that made him doubt if his senses had rightly returned. For it was that of another leather-masked man.

But, as he blinked hard and peered again, he saw that the mask was only a small visor and that otherwise the man was clothed as a falconer, with heavy jerkin and huge gauntlets. From the broad leather belt hung a shortsword and a coiled lasso. Twisting around, Fafhrd glimpsed the outlines of a similar figure behind his own chair.

Then the voice from the altar answered, somewhat more strident and shrill, but still musical and horribly birdlike. And as it answered, the birds chorused, "Tyaa! Tyaa!"

"Now indeed you will die, and in

tatters. And that one beside you, whose impious eagle slew Kivics and was by him slain, shall die too. But you will die knowing that Tyaa is Tyaa, and that her priestess and incarnate self is no interloper."

And now Fafhrd looked straight at the altar—an action which he had unconsciously avoided up until this moment because of an overpowering superstitious awe and a queer revulsion.

The downward-striking shaft of moonlight had moved a little further toward the altar, revealing two stone figures which jutted out from it on either side, like gargoyles. Their carven faces were the faces of women but the menacingly bent arms ended in claws, and folded wings thrust over the shoulders. Whatever ancient craftsman had formed them, he had worked with devilish skill, for they gave the impression of being about to spread their stony wings and launch forward into the air.

On the altar itself, between the winged women, but further back and out of the moonlight, perched a large black shape with pendant, converging crescents of blackness that might have been wings. Fafhrd stared at it, licking his lips, his poison-dulled mind unable to cope with the hideous possibilities it conjured up.

But at the same time, although he was hardly aware of what they were doing, his long-fingered supple hands were beginning to work very cautiously at the tight lashings that confined his wrists.

"Know, fool," came the voice from

the black shape, "that gods do not cease to be when banned by false priests, or flee when cursed by a false and presumptuous god. Though priest and worshipper depart, they linger. I was small and I had no wings when I first climbed to this place, yet I felt their presence in the very stones. And I knew that my heart was sister to them."

At that moment Fafhrd heard the Mouser calling his name, faintly and muffledly, but unmistakably. It seemed to come from the lower interior regions of the temple, mingling with the faint, deep-throated roar of the Hlal. The shape on the altar gave a trilling call and made a gesture, so that one of pendant crescents moved.

A single black bird skimmed down to perch on the wrist of the falconer behind Strava. Then the falconer moved away. His footsteps sounded as though he were descending a stair. The other falconer hastened to the embrasure through which Fafhrd had entered, and there was the sound of knife sawing rope. Then he returned.

"It seems that Tyaa does not lack worshippers tonight," chattered the shape on the altar. "And some day all the luxurious women of Lankhmar will mount terrified but unresisting to this place, to sacrifice portions of their beauty to Tyaa."

It appeared to Fafhrd's sharpening eyesight that the blackness of the shape was too smooth for feathers, yet he could not be sure. He continued to work at the lashings, feeling those on his right wrist loosen.

"Beauty to spoil. Beauty to spoil," hoarsely chanted the birds. "Kiss with beak. Pet with claw."

"When I was small," continued the voice, "I only dreamed of such things, stealing away secretly when I could from my father's house to this holy place. Yet even at that time the spirit of Tyaa was in me, making me feared and avoided by others."

"Then one day I found a young wounded bird hiding here, and I nursed it back to health. It was a descendant of one of the ancient birds of Tyaa, who, when the temple was defiled and shut up, flew away to the Mountains of Darkness to await the time when Tyaa would call them back. Sensing by dim occult means that Tyaa had been reborn in me, it had returned. It knew me, and slowly—because we were small and alone—we remembered some of the ancient rituals and regained the power of conversing together."

"Then as year followed year, the others straggled back from the Mountains of Darkness, one by one. And these mated. And our ceremonies grew in perfection. It became difficult for me to be a priestess of Tyaa, without the outer world uncovering my secret. There was food to get, grain and flesh. There were long hours of instruction."

"Yet I persevered. And all the while those of my station in the outer world hated me more and more, sensing my power, and they affronted me and sought to humiliate me."

"A thousand times a day the honor of Tyaa was trampled in the dust. I

was cheated of the privileges of my birth and station, and forced to consort with the uncouth and vulgar. Yet I submitted, and acted as if I were one of them, mocking their witlessness and frivolity and vanity. I hid my time, feeling within me the ever-strengthening spirit of Tyaa."

"Tyaa! Tyaa!" echoed the birds.

"And then I searched for and found helpers in my quest: two descendants of the ancient Falconers of Tyaa, whose families had cherished the old worship and the old traditions. They knew me and did me homage. They are my priesthood!"

Fafhrd sensed the falconer behind him how reverently low. He felt as if he were witnessing some malign shadow-show. Apprehension for the Mouser was like a lead weight pressing down on his confused thoughts. Irrelevantly, he noted a pearl-crusted brooch and a sapphire bracelet on the dirtied floor a little way from his chair. The jewels still lay where they had spilled from Stravas' bag.

"Four months ago," persisted the voice, "in the waning of the Moon of the Owl, I felt that Tyaa had grown to full stature in me, and that the time had come for Tyaa's reckoning with Lankhmar."

"So I sent the birds forth to take the old tribute, bidding them punish when tribute was refused, or when the woman was notorious for vanity and pride. Swiftly they regained all their old cunning. Tyaa's altar was fittingly decked. And Lankhmar learned to fear, though not knowing they feared Tyaa. It shall not be so

for long!" Here the voice became piercingly shrill.

"Soon I shall proclaim Tyaa openly. The doors of the temple will be opened to worshipper and tribute-bringer. The idols of the Great God will be cast down, and his temples broken. The rich and insolent women who despised Tyaa in me will be summoned here. And this altar will feel again the sweetness of sacrifice." The voice rose to a screech. "Even now it beings! Even now two interlopers will feel Tyaa's vengeance!"

Sound of a shuddering inhalation came from Stravas' throat, and he rocked futilely from side to side against his bonds. Fafhrd pried frantically at the loosening lashing of his right hand. A portion of the black birds rose at command from their perches—but then settled uncertainly back, for the trilling command was not completed.

The other falconer had returned and was advancing toward the altar, his right hand raised in solemn salute. There was no bird on his wrist now. In his left hand he carried a bloody shortsword.

The shape on the altar eagerly edged forward into the moonlight, so that Fafhrd saw it clearly for the first time. It was no giant bird or monstrous hybrid, but a woman muffled in black draperies with long, pendant sleeves. Her black hood fallen back revealed, white in the moonlight though stranded with gleaming black hair, a triangular face, whose glassily bright eyes and predatory aspect were suggestive of a bird, but also of an evil, oddly beau-

tiful child. She moved in a crouching, short-stepped, fluttering way.

"Three in a night," she cried. "You have killed the third. It is well, falconer."

Stravas could be heard saying in a gasping voice, "I know you. I know you."

Still the falconer advanced, until she said quickly, "What is it? What do you want?" Then the falconer leaped at her with catlike swiftness and advanced the bloody sword so that it glittered redly against the black fabric covering her bosom.

And Fafhrd heard the Mouser say, "Move not, Arya. Nor command your birds to any evil action. Or you will die in a wink, as your falconer and his black pet died."

For five choking heartbeats there was dead silence. Then the woman on the altar began to breathe in an audible, dry, strangled way, and utter short, broken cries that were almost croakings.

Some of the black birds rose from their perches and beat about uncertainly, dipping in and out of the shafts of moonlight, though keeping clear of the altar. The woman began to sway and rock from side to side. The sword followed her unalterably, like a pendulum.

Fafhrd noted the second falconer move up beside him, raising his short sword for a throw. Putting all his strength into one mighty leverage of wrist and forearm, Fafhrd snapped the last of the lashings, ponderously heaved himself and the chair up and forward, caught the falconer's wrist as it started to whip the short-

sword forward, and hurtled down with him to the floor. There they twisted mercilessly until the man squealed from pain and a bone snapped. Then Fafhrd lay there heavily atop him, staring at the leather-masked, gauntleted Mouser and the woman.

"Two falconers in a night," said the Mouser, mimicking the woman. "It is well, Fafhrd. I did not see that one in the shadows." Then he continued pitilessly, "The masquerade is over, Atya. Your vengeance on the highborn women of Lankhmar has come to an end. Ah, but fat Muulsh will be surprised at his little dove! To steal even your own jewels! Almost too cunning, Atya!"

A cry of bitter anguish and utter defeat came from the woman, in which her humiliation and weakness showed naked. But then she ceased to sway and a look of utter desperation tightened her decadent face.

"To the Mountains of Darkness!" she cried out wildly. "To the Mountains of Darkness! Bear Tyaa's tribute to Tyaa's last stronghold!" And she followed this with a series of strange whistles and trillings and screams.

At this all the birds rose together, though still keeping clear of the altar. They milled wildly, giving vent to varied squawlings, which the woman seemed to answer.

"No tricks now, Atya!" said the Mouser. "Death is close."

Then one of the black fowl dipped to the floor, clutched an emerald-studded bracelet, rose again, and beat

with it through a deep embrasure in that wall of the temple which overlooked the River Hlal. One after another, the other birds followed its example.

As if in some grotesque ritual procession, they sailed out into the night, bearing a fortune in their claws: necklaces, brooches, rings and pins of gold, silver, electrum, and green-metal set with all colors of jewels, palely rich in the moonlight.

After the last three for whom no jewels were left vanished, Atya raised her black-draped arms toward the two outjutting sculptures of winged women, as if imploring a miracle, gave voice to a mad lonely wail, recklessly sprang from the altar, and ran after the birds.

The Mouser did not strike, but followed her, his sword dangerously close. Together they plunged into the embrasure. There was another cry, and after a little the Mouser returned alone and came over to Fafhrd. He cut Fafhrd's bonds, and pulled away the chair, helping him up. The injured falconer did not move, but lay whimpering softly like a dog.

"She sprang into the Hlal?" asked Fafhrd, his throat dry. The Mouser nodded.

Fafhrd dazedly rubbed his forehead. But his mind was clearing, as the effects of the poison waned.

"Even the names were the same," he mumbled softly. "Atya and Tyaa!"

The Mouser began to saw at the lashings of the Master Thief. "Some of your men tried to pepper me to-

night, Stravas," he said lightly. "I had no easy time eluding them and finding my way up the choked stairs."

"I am sorry for that—now," said Stravas.

"They were your men too, I suppose, who went jewel-stealing to Muulsh's house tonight?"

Stravas nodded, uncramping loosened limbs. "But I hope we're allies now," he answered, "though there's no loot to share, except for some worthless glass and gewgaws." He laughed grimly. "Was there no way to get rid of those black demons without losing all?"

"For a man plucked from the beak of death, you are very greedy, Stravas," said the Mouser. "But I suppose it's your professional training. No, I for one am glad the birds have fled. Most of all I feared they would get out of hand—as would surely have happened had I killed Atya. Only she could control them. Then we'd have died sure. Observe how Fafhrd's arm is swollen from a couple of tiny pricks."

"Perhaps the birds will bring the treasure back," said Stravas hopefully.

"I do not think so," answered the Mouser.

TWO NIGHTS later, Muulsh the money-lender, having learned something of these matters from a broken-armed falconer who had long been employed to care for his wife's songbirds, sprawled comfortably on the luxurious bed in his wife's room.

One pudgy hand clasped a goblet of wine, the other that of a pretty maid who had been his wife's hairdresser.

"I never really loved her," he said, pulling the demurely smiling wench toward him. "It was only that she used to goad and frighten me."

The maid gently disengaged her hand.

"I just want to hang the coverings on those cages," she explained. "Their eyes remind me of hers." And she shivered delicately under her thin tunic.

When the last songbird was shrouded and silent, she came back and sat on his knee.

GRADUALLY the fear left Lankmar. But many wealthy women continued to wear silver cages over their features, considering it a most enchanting fashion.

And some time afterwards the Mouser said to Fafhrd, "There is a thing I have not told you. When the creature leaped into the Hlal, it was full moonlight. Yet somehow my eyes lost her as she fell, and I saw no splash whatever, although I peered closely. Then, as I lifted my head, I saw the end of that ragged procession of birds across the moon. Behind them came, I thought, a very much larger bird, flapping strongly, though in a somewhat ungainly and unnatural fashion. That is all."

"And you think—" asked Fafhrd.

"Why, I think she fell into the Hlal," said the Mouser slowly, his face a mask.

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